

Leviticus: On Words and Things

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What is your most memorable smell from childhood? Scientists have shown that olfactory memories can be very powerful which is why most of us remember not only sights and sounds of youth, but quite often smells too! You may recall pleasant scents: pine trees or pine sol, your backyard after a rain, wood burning in the fireplace. You may remember unpleasant smells. For me it's burnt gravy. I was on a Boy Scout campout and someone served mashed potatoes with burnt gravy. I can still smell it. I don't typically have gravy and I haven't been around burnt gravy in decades, but I know exactly what it smells like! And when we recall those smells, good and bad, we do so at a deep level, a visceral level, right? We carry that grass or that bubbe's perfume or that burnt gravy not just in our noses but in our kishkes.

So it makes sense that our parasha, one so visceral it deals quite literally with viscera, includes vivid descriptions of smell. "*V'im min hatzon korbano min hak'savim oh min ha'izim l'olah....* If his offering for a burnt offering is from the flock, of sheep or of goats, he shall make his offering a male without blemish. It shall be slaughtered before the Lord on the north side of the altar, and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar. When it has been cut up into sections, the priest shall lay them out, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar." But wait, there's more! "The entrails and the legs shall be washed with water; the priest shall offer up and turn the whole into smoke on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a gift [here it comes] of pleasing odor to the Lord, *re'ach nichoach laShem*" (Lev. 1:10-13).

Raise your hand if you like *Vayikra*. Some people do. There's something appealing about it at a gut level, something physical, tangible, gritty and real about Leviticus. Much of the Torah is about words, narrative, plot and character development, powerful stories that shape and animate our people's past, present and future. We are a people of the book, which is to say we're a people of words. And we come by it honestly. God creates the world through words. "*Vayomer Elohim yehi ohr*, God said, let there be light, *vayehi ohr*, and there was light... let there be an expanse in the midst of the water... let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear...let the earth sprout vegetation...let there be lights in the expanse of the sky...let us make humanity in our image...." The unfolding narrative of creation is not only related to us through words, the exquisite words of Genesis, but it's made possible by words, the words of God. In the Torah's telling, God quite literally speaks the world into existence. We said it this morning in the first prayer of *P'sukei D'zimra*: "*Baruch Sh'amar v'haya ha'olam*, Blessed is the One who spoke and the world was."

So words are foundational, a tool for creation. And we, humanity, created in the divine image (*b'tzelem Elohim*) lay claim to that same tool to render new creations: ideas, plans, jokes (this is April Fools Day after all). But we also create relationships with words and words coalesce in works of art (plays, poems, novels). On Pesach, we evoke memories with words by telling the ancient story, the core narrative, of our people: we were slaves, we were freed; so we celebrate and serve. Words are important, but no seder would be complete with only words. Pesach is also about things, stuff you can grab onto, interact with in a *tachlis* way. We taste the dryness of

the *matza*, the saltiness with the *karpas*. Pesach is multisensory: we touch and taste and see and hear – and of course we smell - the sweet *charoset* or the bitter *maror* or (if you're a meat eater like me) the unforgettable smell of first-cut brisket. *Re'ach nichoach la'Shem!*

Burnt gravy, disgusting! Brisket, amazing. But there's another smell that clings to my nose from childhood. The smell of sawdust. One of the great things about having my mom in town last week is we got to reminisce about my dad who left the world in 2004. When my parents were young and newly married, my mother started a woodworking business in our basement. Dad had risen through the ranks of a mental hospital in Chicago to handle HR. But after the hospital was bought out by a large corporation, forcing dad to lay off numerous employees, they got rid of Dad too. Feel disillusioned, dad joined mom in the basement where, together, they grew mom's small business crafting personalized coats and picture frames. Their company was called Lettercraft – names of children adorning their products, words transformed into solid, wooden things. Dad traveled from state to state hawking their wares and managed to get their creations in upwards of 200 boutiques around the country. At the height of the business, Phyllis and Larry Burg's company was featured in the Sears and Spiegel catalogues (remember Spiegel?) For someone who spent (and spends) a lot of time with books, treasuring the precious words within them, I have powerful memories of childhood in that basement. The sound of the jigsaw humming while mom cut letters for some kid's name, helping my parents to sand down the rough edges, the indescribable smell of sawdust which got everywhere! In some ways, my sister Wendy and I come by it honestly: two great-grandfathers were most definitely handy. Abe Malk was a cobbler in the old country. Harry (*Yerachmiel*), the man for whom I am named, made wagon wheels. I've never made a wagon wheel. I did manage to install a Container Store wire rack system in our pantry. Mostly though, I've made a life and career of words. But my family, my ancestry, many of them made a living with things.

Words and things were the topic of provocative column this past December by Bret Stephens in the Wall Street Journal. I had the opportunity to hear him Stephens speak about this and other important matters at AIPAC this week. Bret Stephens is an important thinker right now. He's a Conservative-leaning columnist, former editor of the Jerusalem Post, a never-Trumper who gave an exquisite talk at UCLA recently on the value of truth and fact in journalism for the Daniel Pearl Memorial Lecture. In the column, Stephens wrestles with the outcome of the presidential election by contending that those in the "words" business are out-of-touch with those who deal more often in "things."

"...regulations, he writes, "go largely unnoticed by coastal elites because we're mostly in the business of producing and manipulating words—as politicians, lawyers, bureaucrats, academics, consultants, pundits and so on. But regulations (and those who profit from them) are the bane of anyone who produces or delivers things: jet engines, burgers, pool supplies, you name it." As someone who makes a living with words, I resemble this critique. I tend to support regulation. I get nervous, to say the least, when banks are allowed free reign that leads to predatory lending. I get plenty nervous when the EPA attempts to reverse limits on greenhouse gases. I stand by these beliefs as good policy, but I wonder: have I not been sufficiently sympathetic to individuals who have the more immediate concern of earning an honest day's work? I'm thrilled the Hogan Administration wasn't able to open up Chesapeake Oyster sanctuaries for harvest, but perhaps I haven't given enough thought to how it feels for watermen as they struggle to make ends meet.

The reason I'm nearsighted in this area, says Stephens, is that "words" people are the beneficiaries of perhaps the greatest market *deregulation* in history. It's called the Bill of Rights. "Words-makers have the benefit of the First Amendment," he says, "that great guard against speech regulation, to keep the government at arm's-length from their work. Things-makers do not. It's one of the reasons our worlds seem politically so far apart."

A year ago, when we read *Vayikra*, I must confess I had not considered its implications for Trump voters, but today, I'm reminded of the power of things. For those of us, who tend to turn up our noses at the detailed description of the sacrifices, the gory articulation of burning flesh or steaming entrails, I want to invite us to look a little closer, to sniff around (if you will). *Vayikra* enters the mind through a different part of the brain. It's nonsensical, illogical even, but real, substantial. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed two-thousand years ago, we languished for a while. But then we gained much, mostly by foregrounding the *sefer Torah*, the book, the consumption of words. There have always been *mitzvot* of course, sacred obligations. We are a people of doers, but sometimes were are disproportionately a people of thinkers. There's nothing wrong with thinking, and sometimes I wish people would do more of it – but, as we learn in *Pirket Avot*, "Im ein kemach, ein Torah." Without "flour," without the material, palpable world, there can be no Torah. At some level, it is matter that matters more and those of us who revel in ephemeral palaces constructed with words, would do well to remember God wasn't entirely satisfied with words. *Yehi Ohr*, God spoke in order to make stuff, the stuff of the universe.

The stuff of life is no less a part of being Jewish than the ideas and words that form the framework of our theology. This was the basis for early Zionists who determined our people had spent far too much time poring over manuscripts, squinting at words. A.D. Gordon, the nineteenth and twentieth century labor-zionist spoke of a "religion of labor," the so-called New Jew who returns to the land, pushing the dirt once again between her fingers, rising early in the morning to pungent smells of the *refet*, the kibbutz livestock. To be clear, I'm not advocating those of us in the words business, the lawyers and writers and rabbis among us, I not suggesting we are doing wrong nor that we should hang up our quills. But maybe, in the aftermath of this election, in an attempt to better understand at least some of those who saw fit to put our president in the White House, we should approach conversations about the production or movement of things with a bit more humility.

After all, our parasha begins with *anivut*, with humility. Why is the aleph at the end of *Vayikra* written smaller than the rest of text? Our Sages understand this as a sign of Moshe's modesty, he diminishes himself to make space for God. God may have granted us the precious gift of words, but we are also the inheritors of bodies, of buildings and bridges, of forests and mountains, of earth and sky. There are many words to describe the beauty and horrors of this life and of our world, but life is lived through our five senses. For all the books I've read and cherished in my life, I will always revel in the smell of sawdust.