

**Torah From a Mussar Perspective**  
**Parshat Tzav – Leviticus 6:1-8:36**  
**Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis**

This *Shabbat* will end as we welcome the Festival of *Pesach*. In our tradition this *Shabbat* is known as *Shabbat HaGadol*. Rabbi Ronald Isaacs writes:<sup>1</sup>

The Sabbath immediately preceding Passover is called *Shabbat HaGadol*, the “Great Sabbath.” According to tradition, the 10th of *Nisan* in the year of the Exodus was a Shabbat. It was considered a great event, in fact a miracle, that the Israelites could on that day select a lamb for sacrifice without being molested by their Egyptian masters, who, at other times, would have stoned them for such daring.

Another possible reason for the name is that the *haftarah* (Malachi 3:4-24), the prophetic portion, speaks of the “great day” of God on which the Messiah will appear. A novel explanation for the name of *Shabbat HaGadol* is that the people used to return from the synagogue later than usual on this Sabbath because of the unusually long sermon that was customary on this day.

There are numerous other interpretations of why this Shabbat is known as *Shabbat HaGadol*. Nevertheless, we still have our weekly *parshah*, *Parshat Tzav*, before us. In Leviticus 6:2 we read:

צו את־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל־מִזְבֵּחַ כָּל־  
הַלֵּילָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּשְׂרֹף בּוֹ:

Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar shall be kept going on it.

One possible way to read the verse through a *Mussar* lens may be derived from *Midrash Sifra Vayikra* where we are taught:<sup>2</sup>

*Tzav/Command*: There is no *Tzav/Command* which does not prompt an individual to engage in זירוז/*ziruz*, zeal: both [for the sake of] the immediate situation and for future generations.

As students of *Mussar* we can immediately hear in this the *middah* of *zerizut*/alacrity. I can easily imagine that in your home, as in mine, there has been a great deal of *zerizut* over recent days and weeks: cleaning, finishing up or selling *chametz*, shopping, cooking – and more – all in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-hagadol/>

<sup>2</sup> *Midrash Sifra, Tzav, Chapter 1:1*

preparation for *Pesach* which this year, comes right at the end of *Shabbat*. With this timing, for many all of the preparations must be concluded even before *Shabbat* comes in.

In a teaching on this verse in *Shiurei Chumash*, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe offers an insight which he attributes to “a wonderful” insight from his teacher, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz:<sup>3</sup>

The laws of sacrifice in (last week’s reading) *Parashat Vayikra* were not called by the name “Torah.” [However], in this [week’s reading] *Tzav*, they are referred to as *Torat Ha-Olah*/the ritual of the *Olah*, *Torat HaShlamim*/the ritual of the *Shlamim*, and so on.

The reason is that the term “Torah” is only employed when something is explained in all its details, as in *Parashat Tzav*, where all the laws of sacrifice are presented in explicit detail. This is different from *Parsahat Vayikra* where only general principles were mentioned.

Rav Wolbe continues,

Our Sages teach<sup>4</sup> that there are 613 *mitzvot*, which are a reflection of the 613 limbs [in a human body.] We should not attempt to understand this as a *siman*, that is, in a symbolic way. [Rather, we should understand it according to its simple meaning (or “as it is.”) In the formation of *Adam* [the human being], the human already had all the commandments within. Each limb represents a single commandment. The difference is only a matter of *k’lal* (meaning a general principle), and *P’rat* (meaning explicit detail.) The human being, at the time of *yetzirato* (formation, or creation) represents the *K’lal*/general, while the Torah is the *P’rat*, the explicit details.

Rav Wolbe traces this to “*Avraham Avinu*”<sup>5</sup> who kept all of Torah in its entirety.” But you might ask, how is that possible since the Torah was given to Moses and Israel many generations later at Mount Sinai. Rav Wolbe answers this by stating that *Avraham Avinu* “learned it [Torah] *mey-atzmo*,<sup>5</sup> from himself.”

Rav Wolbe’s concept of *mey-atzmo* is a key theme in his teachings. In his course on Rav Wolbe’s *Alei Shur* a few years back, our teacher Rabbi Avi Fertig spent a fair amount of time leading those of us in the class to understand the meaning of *mey-atzmo*. At that time Avi stated, “It is only here in this world and in our bodies that we can live *mey-atzmo* – from ourselves - living independently.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Shiurei Chumash Vayikra*, page 13

<sup>4</sup> *Talmud Makkot* 23b

<sup>5</sup> *Mey-atzmo* is an important concept in the teachings of Rav Shlomo Wolbe – found in his *Alei Shur*, as well as a small volume of his talks, *Pirkei Kinyan Da’at*.

<sup>6</sup> TMI, *Alei Shur*, part 3, Lesson #9 based on *Alei Shur*, volume 1, page 135

In his teaching in *Shiurei Chumash*, Rav Wolbe cites a *Midrash* to support the notion that *Avraham Avinu* learned Torah *mey-atzmo*:

In *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 95:3 the question is asked: From where did Abraham learn the Torah? . . . Rabbi Levi said: *מֵעֲצָמוֹ לָמַד תּוֹרָה* – *meyatzmo lamad Torah* - He learned Torah on his own (or “from himself.”)

Rav Wolbe proceeds to teach that:

*Avraham Avinu* wrote *Sefer HaYetzirah*<sup>7</sup> (the Book of Creation), and as such, he knew the secrets of the creation of human beings. Thus, he knew all of Torah. This is [truly] Torah, *Torat ha-Adam*, the Torah of humanity. What a wonderful insight!<sup>8</sup>

We might connect this with a teaching I am sure many of us have heard. It is taught<sup>9</sup> that

A fetus is taught the entire Torah while in the womb, as it is stated: “And God taught me and said to me: Let your heart hold fast to My words; keep My commandments, and live” (Proverbs 4:4)

A short while later, in the same Talmudic passage, it is stated:

**Once the fetus emerges into the airspace of the world, an angel comes and slaps it on its mouth, causing it to forget the entire Torah . . .** meaning that when a person enters the world they are immediately liable to sin due to their loss of Torah knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

We might say that life is about claiming and reclaiming that which is ours, namely Torah, the wisdom by which we are meant to guide our lives in this world. As we approach *Pesach* we have additional impetus and opportunities to engage in Torah, as well as our rituals and practices so that we may deepen the place of Torah and the teachings of our tradition in our lives. May the coming days also deepen the place of Torah in our very souls.

One final thought: Our *Haggadah* teaches that it is incumbent upon each of us to see ourselves as having gone forth from Egypt. For each of us, in our own ways, there is *mitzrayim*/Egypt, and narrow places that challenge us. As we go on this year’s journey towards freedom, let us take it quite personally. Let us experience it, in the words of Rav

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<sup>7</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* (the “Book of Creation”) is the title of the earliest extant book of Jewish esotericism. The origin of the text is unknown and debated. Based on the language of the text, scholars date it to between the third and sixth centuries, admitting some later additions. Some attribute its origin to Abraham the patriarch and others to the tanna R. Akiva, who, according to the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Shiurei Chumash Vayikra*, page 13

<sup>9</sup> *Talmud Niddah* 30b:21

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 23

Wolbe, *mey-atzmo* – from and for ourselves – for our personal sense of redemption as well as greater awareness of the role we must each play in the redemption of our world.

*Shabbat shalom and Chag sameach!*

**FOR FOCUS:**

- How can you approach this year's observance of *Pesach* with the notion of *mey-atzmo* – from and for yourself?
- Which *middot* can you lean into to make this year's experience of the journey from Egypt more meaningful and uplifting?