

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Tzav)

There is a well-known story concerning John Paul Jones (known as the father of the American Navy) who found himself between a rock and a hard place in the battle of Flamborough on Sept 23, 1779. Facing Captain Pearson aboard the British HMS Serapis, Jones' boat was outmanned, outgunned, and sinking. When it was clear Pearson had won the day, he called out to Jones to surrender. This was obviously the only sensible recourse under the circumstances. But someone forgot to tell that to John Paul Jones whose response, now the stuff of legends, was:

"I have not yet begun to fight".

At which point Jones did the unexpected, demonstrating that the ship that was 'finished' had indeed only 'begun to fight'. He rammed his ship into the Serapis, cleared its deck with sharpshooters and then stormed the deck with his men ultimately taking over the ship. Having lost his ship the Bonhomme Richard, he commandeered the Serapis and won the day, and ultimately gave an enormous morale boost to the American revolutionaries fighting the British Empire on land and sea.

Sometimes, one person's wreck is another's command...

This week in the portion of **Tzav**, we find a fascinating 'offering':

At the beginning of the day the *Kohein* (Priest) must put on his linen clothes. take out the ashes consumed from the fire upon the altar and place them alongside the altar. Then, he must take off his Priestly linen garments, dress in 'other clothes' and take the ash outside of the camp..." (Vayikra 6:3-4):

Why is such special attention taken concerning what essentially amounts to 'taking out the garbage'? After all, this ash is simply the entrails and remains from the previous day's sacrifices; it's the garbage left on the altar.

And if it is meant to be 'taken out, why it must first be placed alongside the altar? And why the special priestly clothes? Is there such a thing as holy garbage?

Interestingly, this act of the 'offering of the ash' known as the **Terumat HaDeshen**, was the very first activity that began the day in the Temple, every day. And on Yom Kippur (as seen in our Musaf repetition on Yom Kippur) the first lot at the beginning of the entire service was for who would merit to carry and offer up this ash alongside the altar and eventually out of the Temple Mount area....

Indeed, at one point (until the ritual was changed) the Talmud in **Yoma** describes how the Kohanim used to race up the ramp to the altar competing to be the first one each day to... take out the garbage?

Why did this bizarre ritual occupy such an important place in the Temple service?

Perhaps it's a question of how we define garbage. Garbage are those items that we feel are no longer of any use or are essentially pure waste. But one person's garbage is another person's treasure trove.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the powerful 9-11 memorial at the site of the World Trade Center. In one of the exhibits there was an old cell phone, eventually found in the rubble of the towers, which reminded me of the old cell phones we all used to use, which would now be good for the rubbish heap.

But this cell phone was found next to a wallet and was thus easily identifiable. And alongside the cell phone was displayed a damaged two-dollar bill, still intact, which had been discovered in the wallet. It seems the fellow who had been carrying this wallet had proposed to his wife with this two-dollar bill, which he still carried in his wallet after twelve years of marriage. For both of them this was their second marriage, and he had written on the two dollar bill: "I believe in second chances" In a heap of ash and rubble; one man's garbage, was another's treasure.



There are two conflicting aspects to the Terumat HaDeshen. On the one hand, it is ultimately taken out of the camp, and consigned to the trash heap. On the other hand, it is first offered up as its own semi-offering, alongside the altar and is called in the Talmud literally the Terumat HaDeshen: The offering or raising up 'of the ash... So which is it? Is it garbage, refuse, meant to be discarded? Or is it elevated, holy, a product of the holy sacrifices?

Perhaps it is both. The **Rambam** (Maimonides) points out, in his Hilchot Deot (Laws of Character 4:1) that as soon a person feels the need to relieve him or herself, one must do so immediately, because waste, kept in the body leads to illness and disease. You have to get rid of your garbage. And as this is true on a physical level, it is doubly true on an emotional and psychological level; you have to let go of your stuff.

Anger, anxiety, trauma; it all needs to be worked out and let go. So many of the challenges people struggle with in life are due to the baggage they hold on to. You have to let go of your 'stuff'.

But, having said that, **how** do you let go of your stuff? You can try to destroy it, burn it get rid of it; but you can also elevate it. You can decide to turn the lemons you are given into lemonade. After all, this is the stuff you were given, for a reason.

I remember, in IDF basic training that every morning we had to rise at 5am and be outside for roll call in orderly rows of threes, in the freezing cold of the pre-dawn. Then we had to get our kit and gear ready for morning inspection. This is a ritual on every base in Israel, in every course and under every commander. I remember this as being particularly challenging in Infantry Officer training, because everyone else had a good 40 minutes to prepare for inspection, but as that was the only time I could daven (say my morning prayers), I was usually less prepared.

Technically and legally, I would have been within my rights to pray during inspection and avoid the entire challenge, but I did not want the other cadets to perceive me as using religion to justify my slacking off, besides

which the extra work would have fallen on them... As a result, they were almost always able to find some infraction for which I was punished, inevitably by being forced to run the obstacle course again and again until every inch of my body ached. I came to dread those extra late-night obstacle runs, until, after about the first month of the course I started to notice my times were improving ahead of everyone else's... And the four of us in my bunk who ended up doing all those extra runs got stronger, tougher....

Life will often hand you garbage; you will fall, and fail, get discouraged, and even feel like giving up. But if you want to rise up and make a difference; don't be afraid of the garbage, because it is often the gift that will help you change the world.

John Paul Jones was in the midst of a battle, with everything lost, commanding what was essentially a trash heap. But no-one told him that he had lost; in his mind he was on top of the world commanding the greatest naval weapon ever created; he did not think he was sailing garbage; he simply felt it was time to fight. And with his 'garbage' he changed the world.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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