

FROM SECULAR TO SACRED ASHES

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Our first secular experiences of ashes—both of us had similar backgrounds growing up in Southern California—were of cleaning them out of our family’s incinerators, which were widespread behind backyard garages in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although it was a chore we regularly resented and mightily resisted, there was a kind of wonder attached to it. So much interesting stuff—colorful wrappings, gift boxes, magazines, and the like—was reduced to a shovel-full of ashes in a matter of minutes by the hypnotic flames, as we watched intently through the open loading door. And then we quickly disposed of the ashes in the de rigueur metal trashcan that we dragged down the driveway to the street for the weekly pickup.

Ashes hardly entered our consciousness again for many years, not until we took notice of Jews who were planning on cremating their remains after they died—an idea that seemed both unsettling and alien.

So ashes came to represent for both of us the final, conclusive end of life, whether of human life or its artifacts which now find their way into massive municipal incinerators.

Then many years later we took notice of the verses in *parasha hashavua* (weekly Torah reading) Tzav in which the *kohen* (priest) is to “. . . put on his linen garment, and his linen breeches shall he put upon his flesh, and take up the ashes to which the fire has consumed the elevating offering (עֹלָה) on the Altar. . . . Then he shall put off his garments and put on other garments and carry forth the ashes outside the camp to a pure place.” (Vayikra 6:3-4)

Our first inclination was to project onto these sacrificial ashes all of our secular experience. They simply represented the end of what had been an offering on the Copper Altar of the Sanctuary. But

when we began to study the Torah commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) on *terumat hadeshen* (תרומת הדשן), the “lifting up” of the ashes by the *kohen*, a whole new realm of understanding opened up.

Strange as it seemed to us initially, this *daily* early morning ritual was performed only by a *kohen kohen* fully dressed in formal priestly attire.

To take out the ashes?!

But the irony dissipates when one understands that the ritual was a “. . . remembrance of the devotion represented by the sacrifices of the past day to God and to His holy Torah. . . .” Every day individuals brought offerings to the Sanctuary, symbolic surrogates of their own commitment to kill the animal within themselves and use their free will to marshal their mental and spiritual powers in the service of God and Torah.

In effect, the daily repetition of this “lifting up” of the ashes signaled to the entire nation that the new day was but a continuation of the previous day’s devotion to its national mission. It also signified implicitly that the Jewish child of every generation has the same Torah inheritance and responsibility as those who pledged themselves to God and Torah through their offerings on the Altar of the Mishkan.

There is an even stranger irony, however, in the ultimate disposition of these ashes. Typically, once an object has satisfied its sacred function, it is no longer forbidden for ordinary use; but in the case of *hadeshen* (the ashes) they remained *kodesh* (שָׁדֵךְ—sacred, separate and set aside for a special purpose) even after being taken outside the camp and deposited in their final, “pure” resting place. They were not to be used for any other purpose. (Pesachim 26a)

But why should ashes from the offerings on the Altar remain permanently holy?

They remain permanently holy almost certainly because they have a symbolic meaning, beyond being the remains of the offerings sacrificed to empower the pledges made for those striving up toward God and Torah. Those strivings were not simply the exertions of individuals seeking atonement (בפרה) and closeness to God (קרבת ה'), but together represented the eternal mission of the Jewish people—which, as history has verified, has an ineluctable *kedusha* (holiness—קדושה).

It's no wonder that the *kohen* was dressed in his priestly finery when removing the ashes from the Altar—not as a show of position or piety, but to bolster his own *kavanah* (intention—כוונה), to clarify and strengthen his inner mental and spiritual purpose in carrying out this symbolically laden ritual.

Every day as the *kohen* removed the ashes, he communicated to every observer—both those present to witness his task and those who might imagine it in their mind's eye—that the mission of the nation is eternal, and that each day we are to approach that mission with fresh hearts, eyes, and limbs. The *kohen's* dedicated and disciplined service in the Sanctuary was a reminder to each and every member of Am Yisrael.

Each day as the *kohen* removed the ashes from the Altar, he lifted up a symbolic banner that eschewed self-satisfied complacency, every day proclaiming his renewed conviction and commitment and calling for the same from the entire nation.

It was and remains an extraordinary lesson:

In Jewish life ashes are sacred because they signify not an ending, but a call to the ever-fresh beginning of our eternal mission as a nation.

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