Gandhi, Rambam, and the Process of Change – Parashat Tzav

There is a famous story about the great Mahatma Gandhi who was once approached by a woman deeply concerned that her son ate too much sugar. "I am worried about his health," the woman exclaimed. "And he respects you so very much. Would you be willing to tell my boy about the harmful effects of sugar and suggest that he stop eating it? It would mean the world to us." Gandhi reflected on the request and indicated that he would be happy to help, that the mother should bring her son back to him two weeks later and no sooner ready to see results. When the family returned, Gandhi sat down with the boy, spoke with him gently, and over a period of months was ultimately successful at turning around his behavior. The grateful mother thanked Gandhi repeatedly and then asked why she couldn't have come back with her son a little bit sooner in order to begin the process. "Those initial two weeks were absolutely imperative," explained Gandhi. "I needed them to stop eating sugar myself."

There are so many important messages to come out of this charming tale! First, of course, is the idea that in order to change other people we must first look to change ourselves. Here, Gandhi perhaps needed to begin with his own person so that he wouldn't seem the hypocrite or so that he'd be able to appreciate how very difficult living without sugar really is, but often this strategy is useful for a far more fundamental reason – the only people we can ultimately control are ourselves and by modifying personal behavior we can often influence patterns and relationships with others too. Next, there is the message that things worth doing quite often take time, that the instant gratification many of us have come to expect is rarely the best way. The woman needed to wait two weeks in order for Gandhi to have the opportunity to do his own work, but perhaps she also needed to wait two weeks in order to make sure she was fully committed to her son's new diet and would be willing to support him through

the process of change by cooking differently or restricting access to sugary foods or simply tolerating the bad moods that often come when someone is trying to kick a bad habit. Finally, this story reminds us that change is gradual. While it can be appealing to rip off the band-aid and go cold turkey, most of us need some kind of transition to move from the people we are to the people we most wish to be. In fact, we learn that very lesson in our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Tzav*.

At first glance, *Parashat Tzav* seems simply to deal with the laws of the sacrifices that were brought to the Temple in ancient times as a way of worshiping God. While the idea of slaughtering an animal in service of the Divine seems strange, if not a bit cruel, to the modern mind, the root of the Hebrew word *karban* (sacrifice) means "close" or "near" which hints at this system's central purpose: to bring people into relationship with God by having them offer something of value. There were sacrifices to be given in times of gratitude and sacrifices to be given in expiation for sin; sacrifices that were voluntary and those that were required; sacrifices to mark public events and sacrifices that were offered on more private occasions. Just as modern prayer services, which have come to replace the sacrificial system, offer a variety of liturgical responses to the joys and struggles of daily living, so too did these *karbanot* aspire to bring awareness of God into the minds of the Israelite people.

Even understanding all this, however, the sacrificial system is hard to fully grasp, and this is true not only for us here today but for commentators throughout the ages as well. Which brings us to a famous *mahloket* (rabbinic controversy) between Rambam and Ramban, two distinguished sages living in 12th and 13th century Spain respectively! Rambam, also known as Maimonides, was a rationalist philosopher who believed strongly that the purpose of the sacrificial system was merely a concession to human frailty and not at all something that the Divine desired for its own sake. Explaining that the Israelites, at

the time of *karbanot,* were a people just out of Egypt and familiar only with a mode of worship that involved animal slaughter and pagan incense, God gave the people the sacrificial system as a way of transitioning them from idolatry into monotheism, taking their deep-seated need for physical service and directing it towards the one God rather than the many deities of Egypt. It would have been too hard, argues Maimonides, for the Israelites to go from slavery to prayer without the intermediate stage of burnt offerings. The sacrificial system may have looked like it was for God, but in truth it was for humanity.

On the other hand there is Ramban, born at the very end of Maimonides' life, who had a far different conception of the *karbanot*. It does not make sense, argues Ramban, for the Torah to devote so much space to something that God didn't even want in the first place, not to mention the fact that this Divine experiment could so easily have gone awry – with the people continuing to see ram and bull (two animals viewed as sacred in ancient Egypt but offered as sacrifices in ancient Israel) as distinctively holy, as they, in particular, had been singled out by God to serve as offerings. What shall we make of the *reach nichoach*, asks Ramban, the pleasing order ascribed to the *karbanot* as if it itself were bringing genuine satisfaction and not merely part of the Divine's educational program? Which is all to say nothing of the fact that there is evidence of sacrifices back in the Book of Genesis, far before the people entered Egypt and were shaped by their experiences there.

For Ramban, then, the sacrificial system is not a concession to human frailty but rather a religious institution designed to improve and remediate human behavior through symbolic substitution. "Seeing that human conduct is expressed through thought, speech, and action," writes Ramban, "God instituted

that a person who has committed a transgression and offers a sacrifice shall place his hands on it – symbolizing the deed [and] make a confession – as a reminder of the misused power of speech" (Leibowitz, *Vayikra*, p. 8). Ramban goes on to explain that the hands and feet which play such important roles in the sacrificial system are meant to remind us of human agency while the oft mentioned bowels and kidneys were organs of human thought and lust to the Biblical mind and thus particularly significant. By burning these pieces of animal, he argued, we are symbolically burning away our own misdeeds and committing ourselves to right action and behavior. Therein lies the purpose of the sacrificial system.

I will admit that, clever as Ramban's vantage point is, when it comes to his disagreement with Rambam I have to side against him – not necessarily on intellectual grounds but more on psychological ones. Maimonides, essentially, maintains that change is slow and you must meet people where they are – even when that place is mired in a pagan orientation and outlook –so as to eventually bring them to where you wish for them to go. It explains why those quitting smoking might move to patches or gum before they are able to totally abandon Nicotine; why someone beginning to keep kosher might start by simply eliminating pork and shellfish before buying two separate sets of dishes; why novice runners start with 10 minute jogs and eventually work their way up. Going cold turkey or jumping in with two feet is hard! We often need intermediate steps in order to shift behavior.

Ramban, on the other hand, sees the way to changing human behavior as focusing on guilt and punishment rather than gradual improvement. If we constantly remind ourselves about the many different ways in which we fall short and are forced to give up items of value as expiation for these misdeeds, he seems to suggest, we will ultimately stop doing misguided acts quite so often and rather

improve our character. We should recognize that Ramban's approach, too, finds much expression in modern day living – it's one of the reasons why we are forced to pay fines or serve time for breaking the law, why parents dole out punishments or call out poor behavior, why we sometimes even impose upon ourselves penalties in order to be accountable for our actions. Focusing on sin and punishment reminds us that there are consequences to our decisions and helps to hold us responsible for our choices. But in terms of inspiring real, sustained change? I happen to prefer Rambam's slow and steady approach of meeting someone where he or she already is and working to make gentle and slow progress.

Now that Purim has ended, we begin to look towards Pesach, and the Passover season, soon approaching, is not often seen as a personal, spiritual time for reflection but rather as a national celebration of freedom, justice, and redemption. And yet, coming almost exactly six months after the fall's Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there are many rabbis who teach that Pesach preparations might not only include cleaning and kashering of the kitchen but also cleaning and kashering of the soul as well. *Chametz*, they explain, the leavened products forbidden for consumption during the holiday might be seen as representing not only food items but also the swollen, puffed-up parts of ourselves, the spiritual detritus that needs to be shaken out a few times each year. As we write our shopping lists and make our matzah ball soup, sweep out the cupboards and polish the china, let us also reflect on the ways that we would like to be different from this Passover to next, the spiritual work that might accompany our pre-Pesach labor. And let us remember the wisdom of both Gandhi and Rambam and not get discouraged if change may be slow.

On this morning of *Parashat Tzav*, as we begin the transition from Purim to Pesach, may we be inspired to examine our own habits and patterns and to start small at changing something in our own lives that

needs to shift. Perhaps it is something related to our health or our finances, our relationship with our children or parents or spouse. Perhaps it is something that the last two years of living under a pandemic has brought to light, or perhaps it is something that we've struggled with for long time. Perhaps it is something we've tried before (unsuccessfully!) to fix or perhaps this will be our first attempt. Whatever it may be, *Parashat Tzav* encourages us to start again if gently and slowly.

"*Zot torat haolah* – This is the ritual of the burnt offering" (Leviticus 6:2). May the laws of the sacrificial system remind us that radical transformation begins with one small change.

Shabbat Shalom.