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Setting the Table

Nurturing a Healthy Religious Awareness^[1]

I would explore how setting the table in the home nurtures readiness for religious living. The text I share comes from the opening passage of the Book of Leviticus.

And Adonai called to Moses and spoke to him out of the Tent of Meeting saying: Speak unto the Children of Israel and say unto them: When any man of you brings an offering to Adonai, you shall bring your offering of the cattle, even of the herd or of the flock. If the offering be a burnt offering of the herd, he shall offer it, a male without blemish, and he shall bring it to the door of the Tent of Meeting that he may be accepted before Adonai. And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted before him to make atonement for him. And he shall kill the bullock before Adonai. And Aaron's sons the priests shall sprinkle the blood, and dash the blood around about against the side of the altar that is at the door of the Tent of Meeting, and he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. And the sons of Aaron shall put fire upon the altar, and lay the wood in order upon the fire. And Aaron's sons the priests shall lay the pieces with the head and the suet in order upon the wood that is on the fire which is on the altar. But its innards and its legs shall be washed with water, and the priests shall make the whole smoke on the altar for a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, of sweet savor for Adonai.^[2]

We begin our exploration by examining some of the underlying assumptions without which the words of Leviticus would be impossible to understand. Among the significant assumptions are:

1. Only a complex of calendars makes possible the pageant of the ancient sanctuary, which included schedules and coordination between artisans, priests, farmers, herdsmen.
2. An understanding of the relationship between the priests and the Children of Israel, by which each group needed the other in order to fulfill religious obligations in a system of effective dependency.^[3]
3. Human beings are gifted with the power of discernment between the clean and the unclean, and able to develop a consensus for the criteria for discerning the obviously ambiguous phrase, "male without blemish."

4. The work of human hands is significant because actions in the present can affect the dynamic of the future.

5. Human beings have the power to transmit culture from one generation to the next.

A close reading of Leviticus points to a religious experience that was neither random nor spontaneous. A specific animal, a certain gender, cut in a specified way, was prepared with a set of detailed criteria. The blood was to be sprinkled a certain number of times and dashed at a delineated spot on the altar. The set order for each detail was important because in the ancient sanctuary the interaction of priests and the congregation would shape the future for all.

When the Temple was destroyed in the year 70 and our Rabbis re-created Judaism, they drew heavily on the assumptions that undergirded the ritual at the altar in ancient sanctuary. Our Rabbis taught us that the home is a *ygn asen*, a small sanctuary. Additionally, our Rabbis insisted that the table in the home is an altar.^[4] Assumptions at play in the ancient sanctuary entered the life in the home. A complex of calendars and schedules between family members and the community create the pageant of every family meal. The bounty of the natural world has to be appropriated in order for parents and children to nurture each other around the table, both physically and spiritually. Hunters, in order to procure animals, had to fashion implements for hunting, hone their skills, track and dress their catch. Farmers carefully laid seeds in the ground, tended fragile shoots, fretted over the weather. Of course, harvesting had to be timed just right, and that which was harvested had to be prepared and stored.^[5]

Systems of communal support were required interaction, mutual dependency, taking care of each other in order to appropriate the natural world for both human sustenance and survival. As James Stockinger has taught us, no one of us can live without the hands of others.

It is not at first with our own hands that we pick the acorns and apples from the commonwealth of nature to nourish our own bodies. It is the hands of other people that supply the needs of our bodies, both in our infancy and beyond.

For each of us lives in and through an immense movement of the hands of other people, the hands of other people lift us from the womb, the hands of other people grow the food we eat, weave the clothes we wear and build the shelters we inhabit. The hands of other people give pleasures to our bodies in moments of passion, and aid and comfort in times of affliction and distress. It is in and through the hands of other people that the commonwealth of nature is appropriated and accommodated to the needs and pleasure of our separate, individual lives, and in the end it is the hands of other people that lower us into the earth.^[6]

The very beginning of being human has been, is, and will remain our being dependent on the hands of others.

So too in the sanctuary of the home, around the table, the experiences of the ancient sanctuary are recreated between priests who have become parents, and the congregation of Israel, who have become children, each needing the other to fulfill our religious obligations in a complex system of effective dependencies. We manufacture wholesome memories of the hands of young and old alike, working together to create the pageant that is a family meal. Peeling potatoes and washing the dirt off of carrots is when we discover the significance of the work of our hands. Assisting in setting the table, we become aware of our power to shape the future. The table is set in a fashion that is neither random nor spontaneous: the shared food goes in the center. At the table, we discover quickly that the world does not revolve around our own private hungers. We work together to feed one another: not all of the food belongs to any of us alone. Around the table we engage in conversation. We share the events of the day. We interrupt. There is conflict and conflict-resolution, followed by forgiveness. At the table, sitting there with us between the knives and the forks, set just so, are all of the sources of restorative justice. At the altar of family life, we discover the gift of discernment. Together at the table, we are touched by faith—faith in our children, faith in ourselves—to grow, to enrich and to nurture one another. At the table during the meal we learn rudiments of charity, devotion, trust, patience, assertiveness, kindness, generosity, admiration, enthusiasm, loyalty, joy, love and hope.^[1]

The complex rituals of procurement, preparation, and presentation of the family meal awaken the fundamental awareness that we are in profound need of others. Around the table we discover the essential awareness and the fundamental elements of theology. At the table we there is no escaping that we have the power to transmit our family culture. Around the table with those we love most, we become aware of the ultimate Other, of God. What we experience around the table frames our social, emotional, and intellectual readiness for our understanding of the great ideals of religion.^[2] Together with our families we begin to appreciate the great admonitions of our religious tradition: "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind."^[3] "Honor your father and your mother."^[4] "Justice, justice shall you pursue."^[5]

Around the table we come to appreciate that we are different from our brothers and sisters, and yet love and affirm them all the same. Around the table we discover the rudiments that to be a religious person is to fulfill the nobility of being human. To believe in God is to believe that all of God's children affirm that we are all created in the divine image. Today, brothers and sisters, we are called to the table, to the very altar of our religious awareness, to the tent of our meeting, to unlock our hearts so that we may open our hands.

^[1] I am indebted to our Saturday morning Torah Study Group for hearing and reflecting on these ideas: my colleague, Rabbi Seth M. Limmer, Dr. Michael B. Miller, Robert Belson, Ellen Siev, and Larry Fox, and to my assistant, Rosie Aronin, for her editorial suggestions.

^[2] *Leviticus* 1:1-9.

^[3] It was my friend Dr. Michael B. Miller who first introduced me to the phrase "effective dependency."

^[4] See Rashi to *Ezekiel* 11:16 commenting on the phrase "the small sanctuary," he writes: "These are the synagogues." Also see Talmud *Berachot* 55a: Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar both explain that as long as the Temple stood the altar atoned for Israel, but now a man's table atones for him.

^[5] See Talmud *Berachot* 58a, "What labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained bread to eat. He plowed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound [the sheaves], he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground them and sifted the flour, he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate.... And how many labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained a garment to wear. He had to shear, wash the wool, comb it, spin it and weave it, and then at last he obtained a garment to wear." I am indebted to my colleague, Rabbi Ronne Friedman, for bringing this text to my attention.

^[6] *Locke and Rousseau, Human Nature, Human Citizenship and Human Work*, An unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of California-Berkeley, 1990, as cited in *The Good Society* by Robert Bellah et al., page 104. I am indebted to Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman for suggesting the Bella book.

^[7] These thoughts are from Rabbi Douglas E. Krantz, Kol Nidre Sermon, 2001

^[8] The idea here is that at the table as we learn structures for understanding, the nature of our awareness is shaped. This thought is based on the writings of Jerome Bruner, *The Processes of Education*, Random House Vintage Books, 1960, esp. p.6-9, 48.

^[9] *Leviticus* 19:14.

^[10] *Exodus* 20:12.

^[11] *Deuteronomy* 16:20.