Tetzaveh

This week’s parshah, including the haftorah, presents a great challenge to a sympathetic reading to the text. In fact, one has to read against the text in order to deal with it substantively. I’ll state the obvious, and then see if it is possible to get past it. First quick impression: there is nothing to discuss in the parshah since it is all descriptions of ritual garments and the like. When the details of the sacrifices, are enumerated, we retire to a numbed anthropological state and say uh-huh, that’s how they did it.

That is of course wrong. This is not a how-to manual, though it reads that way, but is a text with its own particular wording. We could remark upon the details, this item vs that, this picture of the priest’s clothing, this estimation of the length of a cubit or the value of an gem, but then we stop looking at the actual wording, we pretend we know the true facts about the culture and people, instead of recognizing we have a text put together a vast time after the supposed events and transmission of moses’s words occurred.

The broad picture is that of a people with a high degree of wealth, of extravagance and indulgence, with gold covering invoked repeatedly, a host of jewels, and sacrifices of bulls, as well as sheep, i.e. valuable animals. A priestly caste, charged with carrying out rituals for god, in god’s presence, in obedience to god’s commands.

28:13You shall make settings of gold,

14and two chains of pure gold you will make them attached to the edges, after the manner of cables, and you will place the cable chains upon the settings.

15You shall make a choshen[breastpiece] of judgment, the work of a master weaver. You shall make it like the work of the ephod; of gold, blue, purple, and crimson wool, and twisted fine linen shall you make it.

It would make little difference if I chose another passage, they all convey wealth, power, prestige, authority, rule, glorification of a priestly caste. In short, nothing close to the values of Judaism we embrace today. Further, they are distant from the portrait of a people freeing themselves from servitude and undergoing 40 years of vicissitude in the desert, of deprivation and struggle.

Worse, the picture of empty formalism informing the practices emerges in details like the following: 29:20 You shall slaughter the ram, take [some] of its blood and put it upon the cartilage of Aaron's right ear and upon the cartilage of Aaron's sons' right ears, upon the thumbs of their right hands, and upon the big toes of their right feet, and you shall sprinkle the blood upon the altar all around.

The religious charges that accompany the priests’ actions emphasize atonement and sacrifice, and where we today might turn to yom kippur for atonement as a means of bringing people together, helping them to get past the harm they might have done to each other in the year, this smacks more of the burdens of a people weighted down by guilt in the face of a god demanding more than is reasonable as judged by our humanistic conventions. Today we call out to end the denigration of minorities and for aid to refugees; to align with others out of decency, not to make sacrifices to an invisible being who rules over us. What image could we have for our temple to accompany this parshah: an extravagantly appointed suburban synagogue, with high membership fees, with 4 rabbis in attendance, with a gigantic tabernacle and bar mitzvahs that cost tens of thousands of dollars. Power and money have been supposed attributes of Jews used by anti-Semites to vilify us, and to justify their envy and hatred, and we have always scoffed at their Protocols. Yet what is there in this parshah we could point to that marks us as figures of liberation instead of indulgence and avarice: 30: 1You shall make an altar for bringing incense up in smoke; you shall make it out of acacia wood. …

3You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top, its walls all around, and its horns; and you shall make for it a golden crown all around.

4You shall make two golden rings for it underneath its crown on its two corners, …

5You shall make the poles out of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

In the Haftorah, when Saul shows the smallest signs of decency in not slaughtering everything in sight, when he defeats the Amalekites, including killing the children, he is stripped of his crown and reduced to begging. At first he was told,“go, and you shall smite Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him: and you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.' "

He shows pity, he seized Agag, the king of Amalek, alive; but he completely destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword.

9And Saul and the people had pity on Agag, and on the best of the sheep and the cattle, and the fatlings, and on the fattened sheep, and on all that was good; and they did not want to destroy them; but everything which was vile and feeble, that they utterly destroyed.

When Samuel chastises him, he grovels, 15And Saul said, "They brought them from the Amalekites, for the people had pity on the best of the sheep, and the oxen, in order to sacrifice to the Lord your God: and the rest we have utterly destroyed."

Samuel dismisses Saul who then debases himself: 27And Samuel turned to go, and he seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore.

28And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you, today; and has given it to your fellow who is better than you.

29And also, the Strength of Israel will neither lie nor repent, for He is not a man to repent."

Saul prostrates himself before Samuel. Agag, the enemy king is brought, and dispatched by the heartless prophet: 32 And Samuel said, "Bring Agag, the king of Amalek, near to me." And Agag went to him delicately. And Agag said, "Surely, the bitterness of death has turned."

33And Samuel said, "As your sword bereaved women, so will your mother be bereaved among women." And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

34And Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

These wonderful lines are evocative of similar passages in The Iliad, a rare convergence of the two epic texts. Bluntly brutal, noticing everything, the fall of the ruler and his simple, direct lament, are perfectly stated: “The bitterness of death has turned.”

There is a strong part of me that wants to look in all this for Nietzsche’s will to power, a refusal to sugarcoat the extravagance or to excuse the brutality; to turn our god’s power and absolute exigencies into a vision that so transcends the gentle humanism of our times as to generate a masterpiece of tropes and triptychs worthy of a baroque master like Rubens, with Salome holding John the Baptist’s head, dripping with blood; a severed head from the time of the Greek Hydra, to the goddess Kali, to the Hindu deities whose service with the sword was no less dramatic, no less celebrated by song and dance and bells and whistles and costumes and glories.

In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness Kurtz goes native, following Conrad’s conception, and places the heads of those he conquered on stakes to surround his compound, in Congo’s deepest jungles; and when he goes mad and dies, his last words are Kill the brutes. Marlowe refrains from repeating those words to Kurtz’s civilized beloved so as to preserve her illusions. Marlon Brando recapitulates that role in Vietnam/Cambodia in Apocalypse Now, the power crazed officer. Kill the brutes. And trump has encouraged his own version of this by overriding the Army trial of one of our soldiers in Iraq who apparently felt the same.

I want to end without a resolution to this contradiction that is held within our religion, in fact to refuse an interpretation that would smooth out the brutal edges and extravagance of the spectacle. We actually need this in order to be able to look power directly in the face and not perish with the whimper, it is only a metaphor, nothing to worry about. What more can we say? Purim is coming. Let’s get drunk. Shabbat shalom.