

Parashah Tzav has a unique place in our calendar. In leap years it comes in the month of Adar II, close to Purim; otherwise, it coincides with Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat before Pesach. There are multiple opinions as to why this Shabbat is called the Great Shabbat. According to our sages, the 10th of Nisan, the day HaShem commanded the Israelites to select a lamb for each household in preparation for the Exodus, fell on Shabbat. It is a great miracle that they were able to do this without repercussions, because the ram, along with its ovine relatives, was the sacred animal of the Egyptian gods Amun (worshiped together with the sun-god as Amun-Ra) and Khnum, who, they believed, created humans on his potter's wheel. According to one midrash, the Egyptians fainted when they saw lambs tied to the foot of the Israelites' beds; another says they became paralyzed and unable to intervene; and yet another relates that when the Egyptian first-born, who were considered deities, learned on the 10th of Nisan that they and the lambs were to be sacrificed, they rebelled and urged their parents to let the Israelites go. A different explanation maintains that when they willingly obeyed HaShem's command, the Israelites became adults, i.e., *gadol* (grown up). The Chatam Sofer (Moses Schreiber) teaches that it is because the Israelites returned to monotheism and acknowledged the greatness of HaShem. Indeed, by obeying HaShem rather than their Egyptian taskmasters, the Israelites took their first step toward freedom. A simpler explanation points to the Haftarah reading: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great (ha-gadol) and awesome day of the Lord," (Malachi 3:23). Our humorists point out that Shabbat HaGadol is one of only two times a year when the rabbis must present a sermon, and they take full advantage of this rare opportunity by offering longwinded elaborations on the laws of Pesach. Finally, some scholars believe that the name is of Christian origin, citing many reasons, including the fact that the Greek-speaking Jews adopted it from the early church fathers, who called the Saturday before Easter "great." Because one of the themes of Shabbat HaGadol is reacquainting the people with the laws of Pesach, some traditions feature reading part of the Haggadah as a sort of rehearsal for the Seder night. Most importantly, Shabbat HaGadol marks a turning point for the Jewish People. And now, Parashah Tzav marks a turning point for Moses. After HaShem finishes instructing him on the procedures and laws of the sacrificial offerings in chapters 6 and 7, chapter 8 recounts the seven-day inauguration ceremonies for the *mishkan*, which culminate in the investiture of Aaron and his sons. It is indeed a watershed moment for Moses, who from the outset has been in command, with Aaron acting as his adjutant. Now, in accordance with HaShem's instruction, he is to confer dynastic priesthood upon Aaron and his family. No wonder the rare cantillation trope *shalsholet* appears on the word וַיִּשְׁחַט (va'yishkhat – and he slaughtered – 8:23). Like Lot leaving Sodom, Abraham's servant on his way to find a bride for Isaac, and Joseph resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife, Moses is experiencing deep inner turmoil. The word *shalsholet* means chain, and its looping, up-and-down-back-and-forth melody is the epitome of hesitancy and moral conflict. Moses must surely have mixed feelings as he assumes the office of High Priest for the duration of the ceremonies, only to cede the priesthood to Aaron and his family. He knows that as he slaughters the second ram, the "ram of the investitures," he is ending his tenure as High Priest and removing his family forever from the priestly line. In a lively dispute over whether Moses was ever High Priest, Talmud Tractate Zevachim (Sacrifices) 102a argues: "When Moses was at the burning bush and expressed hesitation to deliver God's message to Pharaoh, the verse states: 'And the anger of the Lord burned against Moses.' ... For every burning anger stated in the Torah, its effect is also stated, ... but in this case no effect is stated.' Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: 'Even in this case the anger's effect is stated, as it is stated there: 'Is there not Aaron your brother, the Levite?' Why is he referred to as a Levite? This is what God is saying to Moses: 'I initially said you would be the priest and he would be the Levite; now he will be the priest and you will be the Levite.' And the rabbis say that Moses became a priest for the seven days of inauguration alone, and after that his priesthood expired. ... And some say that the priesthood expired only for the descendants of Moses, but Moses himself remained a priest, 'Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among them that call upon His name, did call upon the Lord, and He answered them.' [Psalm 99:6]" This is by far not the end of this dispute, which surprisingly, also suggests that Moses was a king (more about that another time). In actuality, Moses was all of these and none of these, because his work was completely different and utterly unique. Moshe Rabbinu, prophet and reluctant leader of an unruly band of former slaves, is the quintessential teacher in whom we can see the multiple facets of our own humanity. We are all leaders and teachers as well as followers and students, and like Moses, we must learn to recognize and balance our strengths and weaknesses as we move through the various phases of our lives. Like Moses, we are not immortal, but the choices we make during our short time on this earth may outlive us by many lifetimes, for good or for evil. So we would do well to emulate Moses and make the often more difficult, but ultimately best choice for us and our sphere of influence, with all its twists and turns, ups and downs, and all its joys and sorrows.