

T'tzavveh 5778

Spencer Cowan

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The buzzword for today is “Bling”!

You may have heard that Jews, that is some Jews, not present company, I hasten to add, allegedly have a reputation for dressing in a somewhat flashy manner, in other words, have a tendency to wear Bling.

How has this come about? Today's parashah and indeed last week's are full of gold overlay, jewels galore and expensive cloths. Where could the Israelites have found these items? Did they bring them all from Egypt. I think not, but at least it introduced them to Jewish Bling.

If you were at shul last Shabbat, you will have heard Hilton Ellis's masterful and scholarly sermon on the parashah for that week: T'rumah. It describes the rules for the making of the tabernacle in the desert and for making the altar for burnt offerings. This altar for burnt offerings was five cubits long, five cubits broad and three cubits high, and it was to be overlaid with brass.

The two parashiyot, that is: last week's Terumah and this week's, T'tzavveh, are deadly boring. They read rather like the instructions in Danish for an Ikea flat pack, but without the rather nice, but completely useless line drawings.

The Ark of the covenant last week was to be made of Acacia wood, as is the smaller altar this week. This week's altar is for incense and spices. Last weeks' was bigger and was for burnt offerings, and you'd expect a bigger altar with all that blood flowing!

God says “Moses get these items built out of Acacia wood. You know, the Ark and the two altars. Moses says OK God. We should be able to find two or three Acacia trees out here in the Sinai dessert, where by the way absolutely nothing grows.

And God says: Right and then cover the Acacia wood in Zahav Tahor, in pure gold. And Moses says, Hey hold on there God, wait a cotton picking minute, where are we to find all this pure gold. OK we did bring some with us from Egypt, but there sure isn't any out here in the Sinai desert, and even if there were any, it would take quite a time to extract it and purify it.

But God says, I don't care, just do it. Acacia wood overlaid in pure gold, so off Moses goes grumbling and gathers all the gold together, but does not gather all the gold in the camp, because three chapters further on Moses is up the mountain again, just getting the ten commandments, as you do, and of course the people get fed up waiting. When did you ever see a Jew waiting patiently for anything – How long's it going to take. I've been waiting ten minutes already.

So Aaron says: break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, your sons and daughters and while we're waiting for Moses to do whatever it is he is doing, we'll make a golden calf and we'll eat, drink and be merry.

Just remember that when you're bored and say you're in the doctor's waiting room, or you're waiting for your train, which is late, to arrive, Take along some gold and make a golden calf to while away the time, I'm told it works wonders.

The breastplate of the Cohanim, that is of the priests, was to be decorated with all manner of precious stones.

Anyway there are ephods and breastplates and something or things called the Urim & Thumim, which means the Lights and Perfections, but which no one has the least idea as to what they are, except that they were all part of the bling, and this and the foregoing gold etc. is where Jewish Bling originated.

It was at this point that I got fed up with the desert, and all that sand, even with the Bling, so just out of a clear blue sky, I decided very briefly to introduce you to an enormously important concept of Jewish Law that you are most certainly familiar with, even if you do not know its name.

This principle is known as ya'avur v'al ye'hareg which means "transgress and do not be killed" and it applies to virtually all of Jewish ritual law,

In general, a Jew is only permitted to violate religious laws of Judaism in order to preserve human life, including the best-known laws of Shabbat and kashrut, and most others.

Thus, the Torah generally says that pikuach nefesh "the preservation of human life" is paramount, and in most situations even the preservation of a limb is equated with the basic principle. Human life is generally considered more significant than keeping religious precepts.

The opposite of ya'avur v'al ye'hareg , transgress and do not be killed, is Yehareg ve'al ya'avur "Be killed rather than transgress" refers to the requirement to give one's life rather than transgress a law.

There are three sins for which one is always required to die rather than transgress, if one were to be or forced to be a party to any of them: They are

- idolatry – this one hopefully doesn't bother you
- sexual misconduct such as incest, adultery, or bestiality – probably nor this one
- murder - and no doubt nor this one

Here are two examples from the Talmud: the first illustrates that if one does not perform a specific action, death might be preferable.

It is customary for the groom to buy his bride a diamond engagement ring. In traditional circles, this custom is called yehareg ve-al ya'avur, be killed rather than transgress, or to paraphrase – that is - this action is highly recommended. Any bridegroom who wants to test this precept, just try not buying your beloved an engagement or wedding ring.

And to facilitate this, our sages have established a formula to determine how much the poor sap of a bridegroom should spend on the ring. It is: -

- take the amount you can just about afford
- multiply by eighteen
- that is how much you must spend

So if there are any bridegrooms present – take note

The second example (not exactly from the Talmud), but which illustrates that if one does transgress, one might like to try hara kiri.

I was at my brother's house last Sunday afternoon and was privy to this situation:

My brother's daughter Emma (my niece) had been going out with Lionel, the latest of her many boyfriends, for six weeks and this time she really believed something would come of it - especially as he has just asked to meet with her parents. So that afternoon, Emma went to her father and said, "Daddy, when Lionel arrives, there's a very good chance that he's going to come to you to ask for my hand in marriage."

Her father jumped up from his chair and shouted out 'mazeltov,' but before he could get too excited, Emma says, "But daddy, you must promise me something. All you need to say to him is a simple, 'yes, Lionel, you have my blessing.' Please, please, Daddy, don't do what you did last time with my previous boyfriend."

"So just what did I do last time?" asked my brother, innocently.

"Well," replied Emma, "you fell on your knees, grabbed his hand, kissed it, and shouted out, 'Oh, thank you my lovely boychick. Thank you, thank you. You're my salvation.'"

And I will end with a good old-fashioned Romanian Ashkenazi "Omein".