

March 30, 2013 - Shabbat Hol Hamoed Pesah 5773

HIR - The Bayit

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This Shabbat we find ourselves in what I might call the Valley of Pesah - between the peak of Seder night - the springboard of our liberation and nationhood, and the glorious Song at the Sea on the Seventh Day and Haftorah of the Messianic Era on the Eighth Day - our full redemption and deliverance.

What was even happening on these days between our departure from Egypt and our deliverance at the Sea 3300-some years ago? We were trudging along just out of Egypt, not even sure what lay ahead, probably exhilarated, and overwhelmed and tired! And we may feel a little of that fatigue - perhaps enhanced by the drowsy effects of matzah - even today.

So what is the teaching of these middle days, the Valley of Pesach, and especially on this Shabbat Hol Hamoed, to awaken us?

One answer lies in what may be the theme of today's Torah reading, Haftorah, and Shir Hashirim. Yes, I'm going to try to connect all three, in the next 12 minutes!

Why is today's reading, from Ki Tissa, chosen? Presumably because it concludes with mention of Pesah in the context of the shalosh regalim - the three pilgrimage festivals, and in order to get there we have to backtrack a little ways so we wind up including some earlier material - the content of the end of Shemot Chapter 33 and beginning of 34, in which Moshe tries to coax God to show Moshe God's face.

But perhaps this content is particular to this intermediate part of Pesah, a time when we want somehow to focus on connecting with the Presence of God. Because the core word in that beginning part of the parashah is panim, face, and we return to that word again at the end of the parashah, when we say:

שמות לד/כג: שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה כָּל זְכוּרָךְ אֶת פְּנֵי הָאֱדֹן יְקִוּק אֱ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Three times a year all your men shall be seen in the presence of The Master - the LORD, God of Israel (Exodus 34:23)

This pasuk describes the national pilgrimage to Jerusalem on those three festivals, to appear in God's Presence at the Temple.

So the beginning of today's Torah reading, when held against the end, actually sets up two types of seeing God's face. One is the very personal - Moshe asking for that private audience with the Divine countenance.

The second, at the end of the parashah, is the national standing in the presence of God at the Temple three times a year.

What these two components have in common, of course, is the notion of Revelation, defined broadly, not just as the historical moment of Sinai. Whether personal or national, they are about God bursting into this world, appearing to us, or being present in order for us to be and feel our being in God's presence.

If the first days of Pesach are about our being delivered as a people - one part of our beginning, and the end of Pesah is about our ultimate deliverance and redemption, then the middle, especially in the thought of German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, is the phase of revelation - our encounter with God.

That is certainly what the Torah reading is about. And Rosenzweig suggests that as the Rabbis understood it, that is precisely what Shir Hashirim is about - a love poem which allegorically refers to the deep and even erotic intimacy and closeness that we - the people Israel - can feel for God and God feels for us (in "The Passover Anthology", Philip Goodman, pp. 182-4).

And that can happen at anytime and in any place, but somehow these 3 pilgrimage festivals are special times for that closeness and encounter. In fact the rabbis read this right into Shir Hashirim itself:

דרש רבא: מאי דכתיב מה יפו פעמיך בנעלים בת נדיב (שה"ש ז/ב) - כמה נאין רגליהן של ישראל בשעה
שעולין לרגל. (תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף ג.)

So the Rabbis imagine that part of our closeness with God is precisely when we come close to God's house on those 3 times a year.

What about now, in the absence of the Beit Hamikdash? Where does this idea of the pilgrimage festivals stand in our lives?

Most poskim say that when we cannot go to the Temple and actually offer sacrifices, then the whole notion of the mitzvah of aliyah laregel - of pilgrimage to Jerusalem - simply does not apply, and that is the case today.

But if the mitzvah of pilgrimage is gone in our time, the longing for it to return is everywhere!

No prayer service goes by without multiple references to our desire for the return of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. We end every Amidah with that extra wish, שיבנה בית המקדש במהרה בימינו, - that the Temple be rebuilt quickly, in our lifetime. And any yom tov or hol hamoed day - even Rosh Hodesh, has its Mussaf liturgy completely focused on the Temple service and longing for its return. We'll say it in a few moments. בנה ביתך

כבתחילה וכוון מקדשך על מכונך - rebuild your house as at the beginning, and establish your Temple upon its foundation.

Do we wish for this? Let's even bracket the question of resumption of animal sacrifice. And let's bracket political complexities of our interaction with other religions and authorities in Israel, and even the near-impossibility of actually getting any of our fellow Jews to reach a consensus on how the rebuilding and the use would work - let's pretend it were easy. Do we even want a physical Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem on Temple Mount?

Many of us, after counting sefirat ha-omer every single night for 7 weeks, repeat: הרחמן הוא יחזיר לנו עבודת ה' - may the Merciful One bring back to us the service of the Temple in its place, speedily in our days, amen selah! Do we mean it?

I confess I have no idea what most of us believe about this. Some of us I think are saying, yes, I do absolutely believe this, want it, and mean these prayers and longings 100% - so what's the point of this drasha! Let's get on to actually praying for it in Mussaf!

And some of us, for some reason, don't connect with this liturgy - even without the animal sacrifice or the political or social complexities - we just don't long for a Temple. Our shuls, our personal connection with God, are just what we want and need.

Desiring the rebuilding of the Third Temple is not a principle of faith, but it is all over our liturgy - utterly inescapably, so it is something we must contend with.

So I want to take one moment to share one suggestion of what I think is complicated about this longing, and then encourage us to challenge ourselves to wrestle with that or whatever it is that we find complicated in this belief and liturgy, if there is something for us - and especially on these days.

The Torah is acutely aware of the dangers of the dispersal of our people. It makes all kinds of warnings and concessions to the time when we will stop wandering the wilderness in a tight group and spread out across a - relatively speaking - large land. Devarim is filled with these comments. And if that concerned the Torah when we were as spread out as across Israel then, we can only imagine how concerning our vast sprawling across the Diaspora is.

Why is the Torah worried about our spreading out? We might suggest that the further we move from the God-center of our community, the Temple, the less connected we will feel. We'll set up our own little religious centers and we may migrate away from God's presence. But, it seems, to me, if we set up our own

centers the right way, we can feel even closer to God! Not needing to rely on going to Jerusalem, but instead having my local shul, is a good thing!

So I think it must be something slightly different. If we stay spread out, I'll be closer to God as an individual, but I will not experience what it feels like to be closer to God with the entire nation together. And many of us may not want to bother with that experience! We prefer to control our relationship with God, and keep it personal and local, and not have to be challenged by feeling so small and having to link to others - total strangers - in our connection to God.

This brings us back to the two kinds of seeing God's face in the Torah reading this morning. There is the seeing God's face of the individual relationship between God and Moshe, and then there is the being in the presence of God as an entire nation - which is something different, with its own power and spirituality and uniqueness. In that coming together we are actually quite small, as individuals, but we are so extraordinarily powerful, as a cohesive community. It does involve subjugating a little of ourselves, and the way we want to do it - the place we want to pray, the melodies we want, the style we want, the architecture we want, and the familiar faces we want, to something much bigger, but the payoff, of experiencing God's presence as a nation - of a sort of national revelation, a return to that Sinai moment of standing in the presence of God with all other Jews - seems to me worth longing for. It can deepen our relationship with our fellow Jews and deepen our relationship with God.

Ezekiel's vision of the Third Temple is in Ezekiel Chapter 40. It is only 3 chapters earlier that we read our Haftorah from this morning. Our haftorah takes place in a Valley, perhaps like the Pesach Valley we find ourselves in now - in between the peaks of our national creation at Exodus - the beginning of the holiday, and our national redemption and messianic era - the end of the holiday. In the middle is the chance for revelation - to truly see - and long to see - God's face. Not as individuals, but as an עם.

But our language for that national experience of God is an old language - a language of reviving an old model - the model of the Temple, and a pilgrimage to it. Some may say that we need a new model. But my question, and my challenge - for this Shabbat, is: can that old model - those dry bones, the vision of centralized worship at a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem as something we truly long for, national revelation of God on the shalosh regalim -

האם יחיים העצמות האלה? Can those bones live?

I pray that they can.