**From Altar to Table, From Temple to Home**

***From “The Altar in Your Dining Room,*” *Rabbi David Rosenn***

This week's Torah portion is the first reading from the book of Leviticus (*Vayikra*). For the most part, Leviticus deals with the animal and grain offerings to God that were a central part of the spiritual life of ancient Jews. At the center of the sacrificial system is the altar, the physical place where these offerings were presented. If you read the Torah portion, you'll see that it consists entirely of instructions regarding different items that must be placed on the altar for different occasions and situations.

As people far removed from cultures in which sacrifice makes sense as a form of worship, we search for the meaning that this part of the Torah might hold in our lives today. But distance from the altar and its rituals is not new to modern Jews. Most of the Rabbis of the Talmud also lived after the destruction of the Temple, so the altar was inaccessible to them as well.

The destruction of the altar presented the Rabbis with a challenge. Large sections of the written and oral Torah deal with the Temple and its sacrifices. Were these teachings no longer relevant? The Rabbis refused to believe that was so. Instead, they set about searching for the inner meaning of the altar and the sacrifices, and for places capable of serving a function similar to that served by the altar. One place they found was the dinner table:

Rav Yehudah taught: Three things lengthen a person's days and years. Extending one's time at prayer and extending one's time at the table… [Why is] extending one's time at the table [worthy of reward]? Perhaps a poor person will come, and you will be able to give him [something to eat].

[How do we know that a table has the power to lengthen one's life?] Since it says in Scripture: …*in front of the Shrine was something resembling* ***a wooden altar*** *three cubits high and two cubits long, with inner corners. Its length and its walls were made of wood. And he said to me, "This is* ***the table*** *that stands before God.*" (Ezekiel 41:21-22)

Scripture first called it an "altar" and then called it a "table.” [Noting this similarity between tables and the altar, both] Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Eleazar taught: "During the time that the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel. These days, a person's table atones for him." (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 54b-55a)

* **Given the amount of time we are now spending in our homes, what do you make of this emphasis on a person (or family’s) “table” having the power to extend life? How might our tables – and our homes more broadly – take on the function of the altar and the Temple in Biblical religion? What are you discovering about your home, and meals, in this time of “distancing”?**