

Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions. --- Lev. 23:2 (acc to NJPS)

Literal translation of the last part of the verse, in original order: *These fixed times of the Lord, the ones you shall proclaim as sacred occasions, they are My fixed times.*

Although these are My fixed times, nonetheless, you the Israelites shall proclaim them. You must add a leap month when it is necessary... --- Rashi

Which you shall schedule as sacred times. “Proclamation” of sacred occasions always refers to scheduling them, as in *The Lord...has proclaimed a set time against me* (Lam. 1:15). --- Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 12th c. France)

The festivals are not the priests’ business more than they are the business of the rest of Israel, so this section is addressed to the Israelites as a whole and not specifically to Aaron and his sons...

These (sacred occasions) are really holy convocations, occasions of calling, on which everyone is called to gather and sanctify them. It is in fact a commandment for all Jews to gather in the house of God on festival days in fresh clothing to sanctify them publicly with prayer and praise to God, and to make them days of feasting. For our tradition applies Ezra’s words on Rosh Hashanah to all the festivals in general: *Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength* (Neh. 8:10). --- Ramban (Moshe ben Nachman, 13th c. Spain)

These are My fixed times: they are sacred to the Lord whether Israel sanctifies them or not. --- Abarbanel (15th c. Spain/Italy)

On Sabbaths and festivals alike, you must occupy yourselves with study of Torah and other holy things. If instead you occupy yourselves with weekday affairs and human pleasures alone, they are not My fixed times, but yours. In that case, *Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them* (Isa. 1:14). --- Sforno (15th-16th c. Italy)

In the preceding verses, the Torah discusses the holiness of the Kohanim who bring sacrifices on the altar, and how they must distance themselves from impurity. Now, the Torah teaches that every Jew can have a relationship with God. How so? The Torah calls the festivals **mikra'ei kodesh**, holy convocations or gatherings. On the festivals, all the Jewish people are called upon to gather in the presence of Torah scholars and reverent people, in order to be inspired and uplifted. When we do this, rather than spending the entire festival indulging in food and drink, God declares: *These are My fixed times*. --- **Amar ha-Ga'on**, an anonymous student of Sforno

Our Rabbis taught: Once the heavens were covered with clouds and the likeness of the moon was seen on the twenty-ninth of the month. The public were minded to declare New Moon, and the **Bet Din** wanted to sanctify it, but Rabban Gamaliel said to them: I have it on the authority of the house of my father's father that the renewal of the moon takes place after not less than twenty-nine days and a half and two-thirds of an hour and seventy-three parts. On that day the mother of Ben Zaza died, and Rabban Gamaliel made a great funeral oration over her, not because she had merited it, but so that the public should know that the **Bet Din** had not sanctified the month. --- Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 25a

Rabbi Akiba went and found Rabbi Joshua while he was in great distress. He said to him, Master, why are you in distress? He replied: Akiba, it were better for a man to be on a sick-bed for twelve months than that such an injunction should be laid on him [Rabban Gamaliel had decreed that Rabbi Joshua appear before him with his staff and purse on the day that Rabbi Joshua reckoned to be Yom Kippur]. He said to him, will you allow me to tell you something which you yourself have taught me? He said to him, Speak. He then said to him: The text says, 'you', 'you', 'you', three times, to indicate that 'you' [may fix the festivals] even if you err inadvertently, 'you', even if you err deliberately, 'you', even if you are misled. He

replied to him in these words: Akiba, you have comforted me, you have comforted me. --- Rosh Hashanah 25a, continued

Why does it say *My fixed times*, and then say *you shall proclaim them*? Even though the sages had great power in establishing the festivals, God reaffirms that the holidays belong to God. We need to be careful and not "humanize" the festival too much. It would be a mistake to make Passover the festival of freedom from physical slavery, without emphasizing spiritual liberation, or to make Sukkot the holiday of the homeless and forget the "**anenei kavod**," the spiritual clouds of glory accompanying the Israelites on their wanderings, or to make Shavuot a celebration of intellectual achievement rather than a time when we re-receive the Torah. --- Rabbi Mordecai Kamenetzky, contemporary.

Why does it say *My fixed times*, and then say *you shall proclaim them*? "Proclaim" also means "call," and the festivals call and draw us to a higher level of holiness, closer to a holy calling. --- Rabbi Yitzchak Meir, the first Gerer Rebbe, 19th c.

Nothing marks a person's independence so much as their unfettered right to the disposition of their time...while we may freely give control of our time to God in observance of the festivals, ceding our schedule to others is a tacit admission of what we are not able to do for ourselves. Both concepts – the need for order and the need to be stewards of our time – speak to our need to believe that we have some control over our existence in a chaotic world. --- Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th c. Germany

I had to think twice about what day it was today. In fact, since we've been sheltering at home, there have been many days when I have had to think twice. Like most families with children, I have our daily schedule posted prominently in our kitchen to add some much-needed structure to this time, but still, the days seem to stretch on. When Friday rolls around, though, there is a welcome interruption to our normal rhythm as we begin our Shabbat preparations. Despite the benefits of

our carefully orchestrated routine, and there are many, Shabbat offers us a 25-hour window to think, do, and be differently than the rest of the week.

In many ways, this is one of the key messages of **Parashat Emor**.

Emor falls in the midst of the Holiness Code, the section in **Vayikra** that describes the ways in which **B'nei Yisrael** are to sanctify themselves and live holy lives. Among its many discussions, **Emor** details the contours of the Jewish calendar. *Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions (Lev. 23:2).* What follows is a list of key dates in the Jewish year: Shabbat every week and festivals throughout the months.

It is only now, in these uncertain times with countless anxieties and unknowns, that I have come to fully appreciate this structure that Judaism imposes. The rhythms and rituals of **Emor** pull us away from the “normalcy” of our everyday and mandate that we, consciously and constructively, create holiness in time. It is deceptively easy to get consumed by the happenings, both significant and trivial, of our individual lives. **Emor**, however, reminds us that we are part of something greater—an unfolding story, an historical past, and a religious tradition that extends to our current moment and far into the future. As we are all pushing a collective pause button, these messages certainly have new resonance: How will we be in this moment? How will we infuse these times with the holiness described in Sefer Vayikra? How will the lessons learned promote a more just and promising future?

Also discussed in our parashah is the counting the **Omer** (of which we are currently in the midst), the daily marking of the seven weeks between the holidays of Pesah and Shavuot. The Torah outlines,

*Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf [Heb: **omer**] of your harvest to the priest...And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete. (Lev. 23:10, 15)*

This year, the ritual of counting and charting a journey from oppression to freedom feels particularly appropriate, and the Jewish practice, here too, has powerful tools and traditions upon which we can draw. The **Omer** is a strange time: In the rabbinic period, it is described as a time of tremendous grief when scores of Rabbi

Akiva's students died (Talmud, **Yevamot** 62b). In turn, the **Omer** period is observed by enacting a number of semi-mourning practices: no haircuts, no shaving, no musical performances, and no weddings. Still, despite these observances, Shavuot is on the horizon. There is a hopefulness to our counting. How, though, do we do this? How do we manage to safely and meaningfully travel between Pesah and Shavuot? How do we navigate the difficulties of the journey and arrive at our destination not only intact but better? Changed?

In her recent *New York Times* op-ed, Emily Esfahani Smith offers Viktor Frankl's theory of "tragic optimism" as a possible path forward. Tragic optimism is the "ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss and suffering." Individuals who embrace this "experience despair and stress, and acknowledge the horror of what's happening. But even in the darkest of places, they see glimmers of light, and this ultimately sustains them." She continues to explain that "even more than helping them cope, adopting the spirit of tragic optimism enables people to actually grow through adversity." This is no easy task, and some of us are wired to do this better than others. Still, the **Omer** offers an opportunity to embrace this stance and cultivate this disposition: In the midst of it all, can we hold onto the hope that Shavuot is coming? In addition to the suffering, can this time also serve as a "time of redemptive meaning and hope?"

Preceding our parashah is further support for this understanding of Jewish time. In **Sefer Shemot, Parashat Bo**, the very first mitzvah is given to **B'nei Yisrael**: the mitzvah of Rosh Hodesh (Exod. 12:1-2). Setting Rosh Hodesh and the Jewish calendar becomes the first mitzvah of a free people. This required that they be in tune to the natural rhythms of the world around them, notice shifts in nature, and in the waxing and waning of the moon. With that mitzvah, they embraced both the world in which they lived and elevated it to a sacred purpose. Similarly, in the unprecedented moment through which we are living, how can the structure and spirit of our calendar allow us to find hope, comfort, and meaning? --- Dr. Abigail Uhrman, 2020