

Torah Thoughts Shabbat/Pesakh VIII

5779:

There is a special reading for the eighth day of Pesakh which supersedes the regular Shabbat reading when Yom Tov falls on Shabbat, as it does this year. In that reading, from parshat Re'eh, we glimpse a bit of what it was like to celebrate a major festival like Pesakh in ancient times. The Torah requires that a portion of the new grains that are harvested be put aside to be consumed by farming families as a tithe. The place where that would happen was Jerusalem, though the city is not actually named in the Torah (ask me why another time). Even though the Torah does not specifically name Jerusalem as the site of the Temple and the eating of tithes, it recognizes that a central location may be difficult for everyone to access, especially if they have to shlep along lots of grains and other produce.

So the Torah creates an alternative: the tithes can be converted into money, which is then spent in the city of God 'on anything you want.' In order to maintain the ritual of the pilgrimage, the Torah permits the pilgrim to engage in a kind of religious tourism, travelling to Jerusalem in order to spend the *value* of the tithes in the city on food, lodgings, or anything else. We can imagine the scene: three times a year, thousands of people travel to Jerusalem, with either agricultural tithes or their money equivalent, and whoop it up. They see the sights, including a visit to the Temple Mount, and then go home happy, having supported the local economy. It's a bit like us visiting New Orleans during Mardi Gras or Disney during vacation, with an overlay of gratitude expressed to God for the harvests that yielded produce.

The substitution of money for tithes also suggests flexibility in biblical law that we don't always recognize. Because of its status as a sacred text, we typically assume that the laws of the Torah are permanent and unchanging. That is often true, but not always; the early rabbis certainly took upon themselves the authority to implement the Torah's teachings differently than the Torah intended, and as we see here, as well as in other places, the Torah itself sometimes recognizes the need to make changes in how to fulfill a command. Rather than give up an important value or ritual, it finds a way to transform its observance so that it can be done. We should all find inspiration in that approach, as we seek ways to conserve Jewish tradition.