

Rituals That Anchor Us in Time and Place

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“How much longer till we get there?” With these words we tortured our parents on the long drives that were so often part of summer vacations when I was a child. (One summer we drove from New York to Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, another summer from Cincinnati to South Dakota.) When I became the parent, it was my kids’ turn to ask impatiently, “How much longer?” And now my grandson has a book about Gerald and Piggy, who know that waiting isn’t easy.

In an on-line class earlier this week, Professor Andrea Weiss of the Hebrew Union College, teaching us about Psalms of Lament, noted the frequency of the phrase *ad ana, ad matay*, how long?

Isn’t that part of what is painful to us right now—not knowing how long we will be in this state of anxiety, this state of suspended animation?

Professor Weiss noted that, in contrast, mourning rituals meant to give comfort—*shivah, sheloshim, yahrzeit*—have a lot of precise timing, as if by creating set times, we can control the anxiety of not knowing when things will be “normal” again.

When Moses was delayed coming down the mountain, the people experienced great anxiety. In the view of some commentators, this anxiety led to the building of the *Mishkan*, the portable tabernacle, and accounts for the rituals we will find

described in detail in our Torah portion this week and for the next several Saturday mornings.

The animal sacrifices described in these Torah portions bother many of our B'nai Mitzvah students, but they aren't the first to wonder, Why animal sacrifices in the first place? Earlier generations of commentators also asked why we have all these sacrifices. It's not that we believe that God needs to eat, and it's not that we believe that God takes bribes (unlike the god in the Akkadian myths of Utnapishtim, who liked the smell of roasting meat). It's not a tit for tat, "I'll give you this if you give me that," or even a settling of the score, "You did wrong, now you have to pay up." So why all of this rigmarole with animal sacrifices?

Reading the stories of the Israelites in the desert, we observe that they went back and forth between total panic and an unwarranted sense of their own power. Forty years is a long time to be in limbo, to be unmoored from the life you knew and yet unable to settle into a new life that hasn't started yet.

One explanation for the complicated service of the *Mishkan* is that it played an important role in anchoring the Israelites during an unsettled time. The tabernacle—with its daily and weekly offerings, with its seasons and celebrations—enabled the people to subdivide that great length of time into portions they could deal with. Likewise, subdividing the great expanse of empty desert into holy, holier, and holiest gave the people the confidence we sang about in the old Reform hymn from the Union Prayer Book: "God is in His Holy Temple, Earthly thoughts be silent now."

No matter how dark the night, or how much the Israelites feared that they were travelling in circles, so long as the menorah was lit evening and morning, and God's cloud rested in the Holy of Holies, all was right with the world. In some ways, this was like the role Big Ben played in Britain during World War II. As long as Big Ben chimed on its regular schedule, even though things could be bad, something was right in the world.

This week we may feel like the Israelites—sometimes fearful, sometimes invincible. For me, it's been a little bit like living abroad. At first you feel overwhelmed, but then you figure out how to buy toothpaste and begin to think you are all settled in. Then as time passes and you appreciate the differences on a more profound level, you realize again that you are not, in fact, in Kansas anymore.

Living with a threat that is undefined as to its duration and without real clarity on how we will overcome this threat, either as individuals or as a community, we, like the Israelites, teeter between denial and panic, between the joy of mastering one aspect of Zoom and the concern about where we will be two or three weeks from now.

In the rituals we embrace—those of our people and those of our own making—may we find the structures that will anchor us in time and place. May God lead us peacefully through this unsettled middle time, between before and after, between what was and what will be again.