

Parashat Tetzaveh
Friday, February 18, 2005

By Steven Leider

I remember reading this week's parsha, Tetzaveh, for the first time when I first began studying with Rabbi Lisa as a new member of BCC and being kind of horrified at the subject matter - which is a lot about the animal and other sacrifices practiced in the Temple in Jerusalem. What with the killing and cutting up of bulls, and sheep, and goats and turning into smoke for a sacrifice-of-well-being, or burnt for sin offering, or guilt offerings - and I won't even go into the splashing-of-the-blood-on-the-alter stuff - it all sounded pretty gruesome.

It started to get better when we got to the meal offerings ("meal" referring to ground up grain or flour rather than a four-course-"meal" with optional dessert), but that presented other problems in that women were excluded from eating some of these offerings. It was all so complicated. Rabbi Lisa's explanation was that this was the way it to be before the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. by the Romans and the advent of the Rabbinate.

To modern sensibilities - well, to mine anyway, it seems so antithetical to think that we could beg The Almighty's pardon or blessing by killing one of G-d's precious creations and burning it up - no matter how sincere we might be in that process. That's why I take such great solace in the story of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who, while visiting the site of the Temple shortly after it's destruction with a group of his students, comforted them when one bewailed the cessation of the sacrifices that provided atonement for sin. The old rabbi told him, "Do not grieve my son. We have a means of atonement that is equal to sacrifice - the doing of kind deeds." And then Rabbi Johanan quoted G-d from Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." What a leap of faith it must have been for the Rabbis to move from the centuries-long practice of cultic sacrifice to the practice of prayer and acts of kindness as a substitution for those animal sacrifices. I'm sure the cattle and other critters were relieved by the change, but how did The Rabbis know that such changes would be satisfactory to the Divine One? It kind of gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "trembling before G-d," doesn't it?

But I gotta tell ya, as a gay man, my favorite part of this week's Torah portion is the section dealing with the sacral vestments the High Priests are required to wear in the Temple. The level of detail G-d provides for the creation of the High Priest's high drag is just too wonderful for words. There are instructions for the use of gold, fringe, jewels, semi-precious stones, ribbons, sashes...for days! Who knew The Eternal was into drag?

This week, HBO has been re-broadcasting its Emmy award-winning mini-series, *Angels in America*...from 11P.M. to 2:30A.M....which I guess explains the dark circles under my eyes. But there was one scene that in particular leapt out at me. Louis, the nice Jewish boy who abandons his WASP boyfriend, Prior, when Prior is diagnosed with AIDS, is sitting in the

park with Joe, the nice, closeted, gay, Republican, lawyer, Mormon boy who is about to abandon his wife for Louis, when Joe recounts how he accidentally showed up for work on Sunday, mistakenly thinking it was Monday, only to find the Hall of Justice where he works as a law clerk, empty.

Joe tells Louis he was “frightened at the thought of the Hall of Justice suddenly, overnight, going out of business forever. It would be a heartless terror...and a very great thing - to lose everything [you know or are familiar with]. It would be like shedding one’s skin, or skins.”

>Joe is talking about transforming - out of the ashes of great loss - into something totally new. This is an act not unlike that of the homely caterpillar cocooning itself in a chrysalis only to emerge later, however improbable, as a beautiful butterfly.

Louis, ever perceptive if not empathetic, notes, “Sometimes, even if it scares you to death, you have to be willing to break the law.” I imagine the same thought must have occurred to Rabbi Johanan and the other Rabbis who barely survived the Romans’ destruction of the Temple. It must have scared them to death to give up the practice of animal sacrifices so minutely detailed by G-d to Moses, and from Moses to Aaron, and from Aaron to the Levites, and from the Levites to the Temple Priests, and instead substitute prayer and acts of kindness.

Angels In America playwright, Tony Kushner, observes that “lawyers are the High Priests of America.” I believe that’s a pretty accurate assessment. In these scary times, when it sometimes seems as if the Temple in which these priests officiate, the American legal system, is being destroyed and dismantled in Washington, DC and Sacramento, it’s helpful to remember the silver lining that ultimately came out of the destruction of the Second Temple.

Surely Rabbi Johanan could never have envisioned that the “acts of kindness” engendered by the destruction of the Temple and its cultic practices would one day lead to a kinder and gentler Judaism guided by teachers - Rabbis - rather than executioner priests. It’s Rabbi Johanan’s spiritual descendents and their faith in good deeds that lead me to Judaism, and especially to this congregation, Beth Chayim Chadashim, that I love so much. The endless variety of ways in which Judaism in general, and BCC in particular, observe this central mitzvah, the performance of acts of loving kindness, gives me hope that today’s lawyer/priests, bent on making the Temple of American Law over in their own image, will ultimately fail in their labors. Perhaps, like Rabbi Johanan, we should remind them of G-d’s words, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”
Shabbat Shalom.