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The last time I was up here on the bima, the Israelites, in our story, were beginning the daunting project of building their Tabernacle in the desert [Shabbat Terumah]. The Book of Exodus was winding down, and the Israelites were listening to the directive of God Who said, "Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them." Tonight, some 2 1/2 months later, we are one week from the end of the next Book of Leviticus, the Tabernacle has, in fact, been built under the leadership of Bezalel (who, by the way, Midrash says was only thirteen years old), and the Israelites are in the process of painstakingly formulating who they are as a people and as a religion.

For a moment it looked like this was too daunting a task. With Moses communing with God at the top of Mount Sinai, and being gone far too long, the people had needed something to keep them going, coming so recently out of Egypt, and so they had built a Golden Calf, worshipping and dancing before it. Moses descended from the mountain, saw how far his people had fallen, shattered the Tablets of Stone in anger, had to return to the top of the mountain, and the ark in the completed Tabernacle carefully housed these precious fragments of the First Stone Tablets.

Now, in the Book of Leviticus, the details of what made the Israelites a holy people separate from their neighbors are filled in. We are presented with the exhaustive minutiae of which offerings were brought to the altar for which sins, how these offerings were to be accomplished, which parts of the animals or grain products were to be consumed, and which parts of the animals or grain products were to be assigned to the flame for a "fire-offering of soothing savor" for Adonai (in the words of the Everett Fox translation of Torah). What came leaping off the page for me in the Torah

Time. Time is important in our religious tradition. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman explains that the Hebrew idiom asking "What time is it?" uses the word "sha'ah" which means time in the sense of a clock or an arbitrary schedule. But for the sacred times of the year, for the holy days, it is referred to with the word, "zeman." A zeman is conceptualized not as empty time dependent on human initiative for its quality, but as something with inherent value that we can choose to recognize or not. To be alive to our religious system of counting time, days do not pass in simple homogeneity. Each passing season presents us with an opportunity to recognize a different aspect of life's bounty, and the prayers for each zeman reflect that zeman's inherent quality. So, on Passover, for example, we have an opportunity to experience zeman cherutenu "the season of our freedom," and on the New Year, we are in touch with t'shuvah, t'filah, and tzdakah -- repentance, prayer and charity. These times reoccur annually, and so it allows us to experience and re-experience these different elements in our consciousness over and over again at specific times on our calendar. If these rituals work, they give us moments that stand out, that become beacons to remember on our journey through life. Without our rituals the world would pale into a bland sameness that could continue on and on without variety.

And so, unlike in Exodus, where the holidays are mentioned in an agricultural context, here in tonight's Torah portion, they are mentioned as periods that have been decreed by God. "These are My fixed times . . . which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions," says God. And so we have Shabbat which is mentioned first, and then comes the familiar

portions leading up to tonight was the incredible lustiness and vigor and excitement of the services in the Tabernacle. As hard as it may be for us as modern congregants to deal with the sacrificial practices of our ancestors, we are inundated with the sounds and sights and smells of the outer courtyard of the Tabernacle -- the High Priest with bells sounding around the hem of his robe; the laity bringing in their bulls and sheep and goats and pigeons and grains to present to the priests for making their amends before God; the priests scurrying here and there making these offerings ready for sacrifice; the animals being offered up to God; blood being dashed against the altar -- all captured in the pages of Leviticus. It must have been absolutely overwhelming!

But in tonight's Torah portion something else came leaping off the page for me -- an underlying feeling of anxiety. How would the people live this new life? What lay in store for them in this new Promised Land that they were going to? What did it mean to deal with this God that they were just getting to know? How interesting that this Torah portion comes at this time in our own lives when we face our anxieties in the world. How or when will the war in Kosovo ever end? What does Littleton say to all of us? How shall we cope with our own anxieties?

For our ancestors it had to do with worship and how to quell their anxieties in their direct dealings with God. For the ancient world, with the essential form of worship being the sacrifice, a sacrifice not properly performed was worse than useless -- it might, in fact, lead to disaster. So it was essential that the religious practices be directed by responsible and well-informed persons. So even though in surrounding societies, sacrifices were conducted by the head of a family or the chieftain of a tribe, the Israelites chose rather to entrust the temple and shrines, and the rituals conducted in them, to a specially trained caste of priests. These functionaries wore distinctive dress, had their special patterns of

cycle of holidays: Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, and the lesser-known Shemini Atzeret. And we also have here the commandments of matzah for Pesach, of the shofar for Rosh Hashanah, of atonement on Yom Kippur, and of carrying the four species of plants and living in the succah for Succot.

And there is one more division of time mentioned, one that we are engaged in right now. At this season of the year, we follow the custom of sefirah, the counting of the omer. The word omer is a unit of measure and refers to the first sheaf of the barley harvest that was brought to the priest as an offering to God on the day after Passover. From then on, our ancestors would count the days -- forty-nine in number -- until Shavuot when the first sheaf of the wheat harvest was brought in. But this biblical commandment establishing the Counting of the Omer marked off an agricultural period -- the time from the beginning of the barley harvest to the beginning of the wheat harvest. After the destruction of the Temple, when our people were no longer able to bring the offering, the rabbis continued the custom of counting as a meaningful way to anticipate the revelation at Sinai that we will commemorate at the end of this period on Shavuot. We are currently a little more than half-way through in our performing of this mitzvah of Counting the Omer.

Why do we use the omer which is a unit of measure equivalent to about three dry quarts? Midrash tells us that the amount of manna that fell each day as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness was exactly one omer per person, and as God provided a daily omer of manna for every Jew, so every Jew was required to give an omer of grain every year in repayment.

And what prompted the Bible in the first place to single out this 50-day span in the agricultural

life, and received their support from the temple income. When God gave instructions for the building of the Tabernacle, God selected Aaron and his sons from the tribe of Levi to serve as priests and decreed that their descendants were to inherit this prerogative forever.

So we have the tradition of separating the Jewish people into three groupings -- Kohanim, Levites, and Yisrael, something that I knew, but never quite knew how it all fit together. It is simply that this arrangement established the roles of individuals in terms of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, service. The Kohanim (those descended from the family line of Aaron within the tribe of Levi) had primary responsibility for the offerings in the Temple (they were the High Priests), the Levites (those descended from the tribe of Levi but not the family line of Aaron) had secondary roles, serving as assistants to the Kohanim, and Yisrael (those descended from the remaining tribes of Israel) were the lay people who brought the offerings to the Temple.

Though the Jerusalem Temple is long gone, time has not erased this threefold division of Israel into Kohanim, Levites and Yisrael. Ritual, as it so often does, helps to preserve collective memory, and this ancient system has a few survivals in modern Judaism. In very traditional synagogues, Kohanim (with family names like Cohen) continue to have claim to the first aliyah during the Torah service, the Levites (with family names like Levy or Levi . . . think Dolly Levi in Hello Dolly!) have claim to the second aliyah, and Yisrael (all the rest of us) would not be called to the Torah until the third aliyah. And Kohanim and Levites participate liturgically in those traditional synagogues which retain the practice of reciting the "priestly benediction" during festival services. (Spock from Star Trek was a Kohain because he held his fingers in the traditional way that Kohanim use when they recite this Benediction.) In addition, we all had a

calendar? Professor Joseph Milgrom conjectures that counting betrays anxiety (there's that word again, "anxiety"), for the beginning of the harvest coincides with the onset of a period when Israel is often buffeted by a hot, dry east wind. So, from April to June (roughly a 50-day period), the crops stand in jeopardy of being depleted by these withering winds. Before the triumph of biblical monotheism in the hearts and minds of the Israelites, Israelite farmers, in their anxiety over the health of their crops, probably tried to ward off this danger by daily incantations to the demons of the weather. And this already established earlier practice may have been incorporated into the Counting of the Omer.

So this period of Counting was actually a negative time. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the Counting of the Omer became a period of semi-mourning connected with recalling the suffering that the Jews endured under Roman persecution, and the mourning of the deaths by plague of 24,000 of Rabbi Akiba's disciples. But according to Jewish folklore, the Jewish rebel Bar Kokhba, after a series of defeats, secured a great victory over the Romans on the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer. And according to another tradition related in the Talmud, the plague that had killed Rabbi Akiba's disciples in the 2nd century CE stopped on the 33rd day of the Omer. This 33rd day is Lag ba-Omer in Hebrew, the Hebrew letters of "Lag" -- lamed and gimmel -- having the numerical value of 33. So weddings which are usually not held during the solemn period of the Counting of the Omer by the very traditional are often held on Lag ba-Omer, this day of relief, and traditional Jews often will give their children their first haircut on this day because haircutting is often avoided during this period of semi-mourning. In Israel, Lag ba-Omer is filled with celebrations and singing and dancing, picnics and outings, and the lighting

remnant of this division at our Passover tables when we spoke of the three matzahs on the Seder plate as representing Kohain, Levi, and Yisrael.

In contrast to our primary status as Jews, which by and large is determined through our being born of a Jewish mother, our secondary status as Kohain, Levi, or Yisrael is handed down through the father. I mention this because I remember my mother being very proud of the fact that her father (my maternal grandfather) was a Kohain and seemed to regret the fact that she could not pass that down to me or my brother.

The sanctity of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, service was such that maintaining the ritual purity of the Kohanim was essential. Since the system of sacrificial offerings served as a point of contact between the Divine and the human realms, those who ministered in the sacred precincts had to be, according to tradition, like the sacrifices themselves: "without defect." How much anxiety could be created if the priests were less than perfect? So tonight's Torah portion has an exhaustive list of items and issues that could exclude a Kohain from serving as a priest in the Temple; defects and abnormalities and blindness and disfigurement -- something very hard for us to understand with our modern sensibilities of inclusiveness.

So . . . so far, we have the Tabernacle constructed, we have the description of the priests who would function within this Tabernacle, and the remainder of tonight's Torah portion takes on the incredible task of constructing time. Time itself is written about in full detail -- how the year would be divided into segments of holy time and how the very week would proceed to and away from Shabbat. Here is the place in the Torah where there is an elaborate description of the holidays, the "holy days," into which the year would be divided.

of bonfires. We will reach the thirty-third day of Counting the Omer, Lag b'Omer, and time for your own picnics, this coming Tuesday.

One of the first times that the Counting of the Omer and its agricultural beginnings arose in my consciousness as something important was at this year's second Seder. I was seated in a dining room surrounded by friends, old and new, and someone at the table reminded us, "We have to count the Omer." And so we dutifully turned to that page in the Haggadah that gave us that information. And I, who wouldn't know a sheaf of barley from a sheaf of wheat if they came up and introduced themselves, got involved in the discussion about which harvest comes first, and whether the first counting commemorates the barley harvest or the wheat harvest. In the middle of Los Angeles where the planting season is going on, we at the table were in Israel where it is now the time for harvesting, invested in the agricultural intricacies of the Israeli seasons debating whether it is the barley harvest or the wheat harvest that comes first. I can now tell you, after exhaustive research . . . it's the barley harvest!

"These are My fixed times . . . which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions," says God to Moses in tonight's Torah portion. In describing the Jewish calendar, we are reminded that Judaism is a religion of time and that holidays in our tradition are not just days off but occasions to celebrate time and make it holy. To be a Jew means to understand that every moment of life represents an opportunity that will not come again; an opportunity to try and find a way to put our lives, and our anxieties, into perspective. To be a Jew means to understand that every moment represents a chance to make our days count. A good thought to remember in our days of Counting the Omer.

. . . . SHABBAT SHALOM