

Shabbat Parashat Tzav 5784

Shabbat Parah

“It’s a Seller’s Market (for Chameitz)”

With Purim behind us and Passover ahead of us, it is time to start re-introducing some themes and practices of the holiday that exists as a kind of counterbalance to the ones that took place just about a half year ago. The High Holidays mark the birthday of the world and honor the spiritual creation of the first human being, as well as the potential of humanity of which we are a part. Passover marks the moment when we became incorporated as a people, dedicated to fulfilling our destiny of living in an especially close relationship with God, and the traditions that would develop to organize and live out this sacred connection, holidays being a significant opportunity to do just that.

Shabbat Parah part of the lead up to Passover. It reminds people that in order to be eligible to bring the Passover sacrifice you also had to plan to do so in a state of ritual purity; that could not be achieved without the ashes of the red heifer about which we read a few moments ago. That has obviously all been made inaccessible to us - there is no red heifer and there is no Passover sacrifice, or any other. But the idea that some things have to happen in advance of Passover in order to celebrate it fully is very much a part of this time of year, which is why we treat each Shabbat leading to this springtime remembrance of slavery and feast of freedom in connection to Passover preparation.

One way to get into the mindset of the upcoming holiday is to participate in a practice that has served Jewish communities since, I’m going to surmise, people started storing more food and drink in their homes than they planned to finish before the 15th of Nissan. This led to a very practical question. Do I have to throw out all of my chameitz or find a non-Jew to give it to? And this became even more complicated in the era of refrigeration, preservatives, and also expensive hard liquor, most of which is chameitz. In the push and pull between the rabbis, who probably wanted Jews to rid their homes of chameitz entirely, and those who owned the chameitz, who wanted the chance to keep it for use after Passover, the latter was victorious. While there may be Jewish people out there who follow the law to its most specific degree and rid their house of and end any ownership ties to their chameitz before each Passover, it is pretty rare to

see or hear of that. So you may recall how the rabbis created a workaround for this problem - how can you have chameitz and not have chameitz on Passover?

The answer is you sell your chameitz. While this is a something of a legal fiction the rabbis took the process very seriously and established a mechanism by which you could actually not own any chameitz over the holiday without the threat or expectation that the non-Jew to whom the chamietz was sold would back up a truck and say bring it out. Most people appoint an agent - I would be happy to be your agent, I just can't be appointed on Shabbat but instructions for doing this have already been sent out and will continue to be sent out. The agent represents all who want their chameitz sold and find a willing non-Jew - in our case Laura from accounting, who we thank profusely for helping with this tradition - and after gifting her a small amount of money she puts down a deposit on all of our chameitz. This gives her legal ownership over it as well as the right to purchase it at its fair market price on a date that happens to be just after Passover ends. Should she choose not to fork over the many tens of thousands of dollars that all this chameitz costs, the down payment is forfeited and voila, the chameitz reverts back to your ownership. But during Passover it is her's and not yours, so we try to keep it in a separate space or at least a taped off cabinet. Thus we can fulfill the mitzvah of not seeing or being in possession of chamietz on Passover, and it is very easy to accomplish this thanks to the rabbis' creativity.

Secondly, Israel is certainly going to be on our mind this coming holiday. The theme of going from darkness to light and subjugation to freedom is timeless, and for the hostages specifically and Israel at war generally it would be, in my view, a mistake to not include prayers for Israel at our seder tables. Perhaps you would see fit to print a kidnapped poster the likes of which are scattered around our sanctuary and have an empty seat where you will be celebrating. Or take the prayer for Israel from the siddur and recite it. Or focus in with some greater intention on the parts of the Haggadah that mention the harder times of Jewish history, while still celebrating the opportunity to raise a glass - or four - to freedom, praying that it will be everyone's reality soon. Maybe as we stand for Elijah we can sing Hatikvah while the door is open or after it has been closed. Inevitably other supplemental readings are made available in the weeks leading up to the holiday and I have started to collect those and will send them out in advance of the holiday. But it is up to you to use those or others as you see fit, and I hope you will.

Lastly a reminder and something of an appeal. In the Diaspora Passover is an eight day holiday and the first two and last two days are elevated as Yom Tovs, or yontivs. All of these are on weekdays this year, Tuesday and Wednesday and then the following Monday and Tuesday. Yizkor is said on the final day and at Beth El we also do Yizkor the evening before that. But that leaves three days of Yontiv that have become, shall we say, lightly attended. It will not be good for our spiritual health if we allow these elevated days to decline to the point of not being noticed. If it is within your capacity to do so and you can commit to coming on one of these days, the first, second, or seventh of the holiday, I think the rewards for that might not be obvious but they will be real. Of course holiday minyanim are held the rest of the weekdays and we wouldn't mind having strong turnout there but yontiv is different and it is our opportunity to mark the holiday in ways similar to and different from our ancestors.

Speaking of our ancestors: They might have cleared out chameitz, we typically sell it through an agent. They may have only dreamt of freedom or even more fantastically of living in a world with a strong and sovereign Israel; we have both but on this holiday will take neither for granted. And with that freedom came the opportunity to organize our time according to the Jewish calendar which has for thousands of years marked the first and seventh day of Passover as particularly special, and for the last two millennia raised up the second and eighth day outside of Israel as well. We are heirs to all of the wonderful aspects of this widely observed holiday, legal, historical, spiritual, edible, and symbolic alike. In the lead up to the holiday we can plan to take full advantage of the opportunity it gives us to connect in so many different ways, at home, with Beth El, or wherever we will be observing the springtime holiday that is now fast approaching.

Shabbat shalom.