

Remember the “good old days?” When we were more worried about a car collision than accidentally brushing against a stranger in CVS? When we got yelled at for wanting to stay home and watch a baseball game on TV? When going to prayer services meant we had to put on pants?

This is Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat that comes before Pesah. It got its special name from the second last verse in the haftarah, that comes from the prophetic book Malachi: “Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD” (Malachi 3:23). *Yom bo Adonai hagadol vehanora* is the Hebrew; here, *gadol* is “awesome,” so that makes this The Awesome Shabbat.

Remember the “good old days,” when we would offer a Shabbat dinner at shul on the Friday before Pesah, just to give folks preparing for Passover one less meal to worry about?

I am waxing nostalgic because of the opening words of the haftarah: “The offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of yore and in the years of old” (3:4). Ah, the good old days. But why does the prophet double down on the language? Why both *kimei olam* and *k’shanim kadmoniyot*? And, what was so good about those “salad days,” anyway?

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein taught me this midrash: “Rabbi Berekhiah and Rabbi Hanan said in the name of Rabbi Azariah of Kfar Hittaya: This may be compared to the story of a king who had two cooks. One cooked a dish for the king, who ate it and liked it; the other cooked a dish for the king, who ate and liked it as well. We would not know which dish the king liked had he not ordered the second cook to make him second helpings.

“So it was that we find that Noah offered up a sacrifice, and it was pleasing to the Holy Blessed One, as it says (Genesis 8:21), “And the LORD smelled the sweet savor.” Israel also offered a sacrifice, and it, too, was pleasing to Holy Blessed One. We would not know which sacrifice God preferred, but from the fact that God commanded Moses, saying (Leviticus 6:2), “These are the laws of the burnt offering.” From this we know that the sacrifice of Israel was more pleasing [than that of Noah]. Thus it is written, “Then shall the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of yore and in the years of old.” (Vayikra Rabbah 7:4)

What made what Moshe offered to God more appealing than Noah’s sacrifice? Why did God only want seconds from Moshe? It’s not that Noah wasn’t sincere and enthusiastic in his offering. Rabbi Silverstein suggests the following difference: Noah acted on behalf of himself and his family, whereas Moshe [and Aharon] made their sacrifices on behalf of the entire community of Israel. Their meals left the king licking his lips and craving more because they expressed the wishes and needs of an entire people, who must have collaborated to produce such a savory meal.

Friends, I continue to be amazed by the response of our community to each other in this time of great need and anxiety. We have congregants calling down our list to check in with everyone and share an encouraging word. We had volunteers shop for and deliver groceries to neighbors. We “attended” a funeral and made shiva “visits” by phone and by webinar. And one of our congregants is providing a large number of bandanas to help cover our faces and keep us safe when we are out in public. Each of these are offerings to the Divine, and no doubt stir the compassion of the Holy Blessed One. But don’t be surprised when God, remembering the “good old days,” asks for seconds. So, while none of us will look back on this time with nostalgia, let’s promise that when we emerge from this, healthy and whole, we will be as kind and giving going forward as we have been in these “awesome, fearful days.”

Wishing you a Shabbat of health and all blessings,

Rabbi David Wise