

TO PAUSE IN THE PALACE: Dvar TORAH for EMOR 2020

What time is it? What *day* is it? Do you know? During this strange experience of lockdown, many of us have found that our very concept of time has been disrupted. The hours drag on, then suddenly they speed up and zoom by. The days of the week may blend into a blur. For many of us, the usual signposts for time have been strangely suspended, and we find that we need to pay attention, to structure and imagine time in different ways.

Structuring and imagining time is a Jewish specialty. We have been doing it since the very beginning (since Day One, or at least, Day Seven!) The Torah begins with the idea that we can give unique meaning to a day, to time. During creation of the world, God blesses the seventh day and creates Shabbat. This is a gift to us, *and* a challenge: rather than treat every day the same, we are asked to generate a different state of being on Shabbat. We are asked to bring ourselves to a different spiritual place, once a week, to pause, and *be different* on Shabbat. The Talmud even tells us to walk differently on Shabbat, as though we are not the same person. It is our consciousness that makes the day special, and sets it apart from the other days of the week. How powerful that *we* can create a structure like this! That *we* can build what Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously called a “palace in time.” Shabbat, he wrote, is a palace in time that we construct and dwell in each week.

This week’s Torah portion, Emor, is all about time. For much of this book of Leviticus, *Vayikra*, the Torah gives instructions for the building of a sacred *space*, the sanctuary, the *mishkan*, along with many guidelines for keeping it holy. The sanctuary, after all, was the *place* to encounter God. But now, in this parsha, we shift from the realm of *holy space* to that of *holy time*. This portion lays out the sacred days of the Jewish calendar: most notably Shabbat, but also *all* of the major festivals. Our calendar for the year creates a different kind of holy structure, not a physical one, but rather – we might say - a virtual one; Rabbi Heschel’s palace in time.

Sacred time is independent of space, it can be there whether we are in a physical sanctuary or not. Throughout the centuries, our people, so often uprooted and wandering, have lived out our religious lives not in cathedrals or concrete structures, but rather in sanctuaries of time, sanctuaries that we had to create for ourselves by marking days as holy and unique. It seems to me, in this present time when we are unable to be in a physical sanctuary together, how precious that kind of *virtual* sanctuary might be for us. As our “normal” lives have come to a “pause,” we might consider ourselves in an extended Shabbat, an extended time when we are challenged to make our days special and holy in ways that help sustain us.

So let us gain wisdom from Jewish tradition’s blueprints for building palaces in time. We can learn something from two names that the Torah uses in this week’s parsha for holy time. First, the Torah calls these sacred days *moadei Adonai* – God’s meeting times, and perhaps also – our appointment times with God. In more normal times, on God’s meeting times, we might gather at the synagogue, or with family, to meet with God in prayer, and to meet one another

in community. So now, in the personal sanctuaries we construct, we must use our time as best as we can to keep those meetings with God and with each other. We might find a way to keep prayer in our lives, in whatever way is helpful to us.

Each holy time in our calendar is tied to different values that emerge from moments in our people's history – moments of joy and of struggle, of defeat and victory, of individual soul-searching, and of community connection. Let us use this time of pause to connect with our core values: to care for each other and for those in need, to notice our blessings, and to always find hope for better days to come, even in the most challenging of times. Think about it: hope is a theme in every Jewish holy day, it is always on the agenda in our moadei Adonai, our holy meeting times. Let us bring hope into our thoughts each day during this prolonged time of pause in the palace.

The holiday cycle also follows the cycles of nature and the seasons. In this time of extended Shabbat, we can connect with God by noticing and celebrating the natural world around us: the rebirth of life in the spring, flowers, buds on the trees, birds; the preciousness right now of fresh produce, and our fellow creatures. As we are meant to do on any Shabbat, let us take the time, to appreciate all of those and be replenished by noticing them.

In our parsha, the holy days are also called by another name – mik'ra'ei kodesh. Mikraei kodesh can be translated literally as 'callings of holiness.' The Torah notes – these are God's appointed times which you will call mikra'e kodesh – asher tik'r'u otam. The seasons and natural cycles are set, the sacred dates of the calendar are set, but it is people who must call them holy, people bring holiness into the days.

The Torah challenges us to make our days special, unique, and sacred, and let us gain strength from knowing that we have the power to do so. So, other than Shabbat itself, it does not really matter what day it is. Right now, let us cherish each day, and remember that *we* are the architects of our days. As we sustain ourselves and support others; as we love one another and stay together, whether in person, or in virtual space; as we keep a connection to God, to hope and to our Jewish souls; let us build sacred structures, palaces in time where we can find spiritual shelter. Shabbat Shalom