

Temple and Torah

This Shabbat, we begin reading the book of *B'midbar*, the fourth book of the Torah. On the calendar, we are on the eve of the festival of Shavuot. These events are instructive for each other – the Torah reading cycle deepens our appreciation of the holiday and the holiday deepens our appreciation of the Torah.

The most prominent verse in the portion, if you judge prominence by frequency, is the message which occurs three times – ‘the foreigner that comes close shall die.’ (see Numbers 1:51, 3:10, & 3:38) Each of these references deal with the treatment of the sacred realm. The Levites and the Priestly clan were responsible for the maintenance and the safeguarding of the Temple. Only the select few can approach the place of the indwelling of the Divine.

The verse refers to the foreigner as the *Zar*. That is a term associated with the foreign flame, *Eish Zarah*, that was offered by Aaron’s two eldest sons. The consequence of their indiscretion was sudden death from Heaven. Their fire was foreign because it did not have a place in the Temple service. It was a voluntary, unbidden offering.

The rabbinic expression for idolatrous practice is called *Avodah Zarah*, foreign worship. *Avodah*, worship, is the language often used to connote the service of God. (Consider the 2nd Mishna in Pirkei Avot – the world stands on *Torah, Avodah* and *Chesed*. *Avodah* is Divine service.) By contrast, *Avodah Zarah* is foreign worship. It is worship, more precisely, offered to a foreign entity.

The *Zar*, then, who might come to the inner sanctum of the sacred realm, is a foreigner; he does not belong in the holy place. He is the foreign flame and he is performing a foreign worship. And, as we have seen, the alien practice in the Tabernacle is dangerous.

The Talmud recounts the story of a convert who became interested in converting to Judaism so he could serve as a high priest. Of course that would be impossible; you must be born to the priestly family to serve in that office. He approached Shammai with his request and he was thrown from Shammai’s study hall. He approached Hillel with the request and Hillel converted him. Hillel then instructed him to become more conversant in the tradition. The convert discovered the verse in Numbers: ‘the foreigner who comes close shall die,’ and he understood that he was disqualified from serving as a High Priest. He praised Hillel’s patience and criticized Shammai’s intolerance. (See TB Shabbat 31a)

This story highlights the counter-point to the distance we must make from the Temple. The theme of the holiday of Shavuot is *Zman Matan Torateinu*, it is the time of the giving of the Torah. The Torah is given to us – to all of us – as a gift to behold, to explore, to investigate, and to discover. Temple life has stricture, Torah life has space.

In this respect, there are no foreigners in Torah. The verse might be read with different emphasis: ‘Shall the foreigner that comes close [to Torah] die?!’ Rather, the Torah invites us in. Shammai was a formalist – the Jewish world needs law and order. Hillel was a spiritualist – the commitment to the covenant is more essential than the particulars of the covenant. In the world of the Temple, experimentation is discouraged. But in the world of Torah, the unexplored life is not worth living.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Shavuot Sameach,
Rabbi Menashe East