

Religion and State

In this week's Torah portion, *Beha'alotcha*, we read about the tremendous fluctuations that the community faces. The portion begins at the heights of optimism, reaches a crescendo with the promise of wiping out the Israelite's enemies and falls flat with complaints, negativity and petty in-fighting.

In the opening section of the portion, a number of commandments are listed; they are representative of the communal progress. The commands point the people in a direction of communal cohesion and harmony. In particular, the first anniversary of Passover is approaching for the desert community. But the Torah prohibits those who are ritually impure from partaking of the sacrifice and the Torah also warns that anyone who does not offer the sacrifice will face punishment from God. So, on the anniversary of the second year of their exodus from Egypt, a subset of the community will be excluded from participation and, perhaps, punished for their unavoidable obstacle. What to do?

Those concerned approach Moshe in search of resolution. Moshe, in turn, seeks suggestion from God. And, in response, God grants those who are ritually impure or too geographically distant to bring the Paschal offering one month later, on the 14th of *Iyyar*. (The Rambam, cited by the Chinuch as well, rules stringently that a child who comes of age or a person who completes their conversion in between Passover and *Iyyar* 14 – must also bring the Pesach offering on *Iyyar* 14.) These addenda to the original commandments surrounding Passover is known as the mitzvah of the *Pesach Sheni*, the 2nd Paschal offering. And like the 1st, the 2nd Paschal lamb would be offered with the accompanying side dishes of Matzah and Bitter herbs. Every adult Jew must participate in the event of the exodus.

What is of further interest is the extension of the commandment to citizens and strangers. (Though this condition was set in Egypt at the first Passover, we may have thought it limited to the original command. This repeat codifies the extension of the Paschal offering to the strangers for all generations. See Ramban, Numbers 9:14.) The stranger, the *Ger*, who we colloquially name the convert, is an outsider who joins the community of Israel; he is a parallel character to the citizen of Israel and the Jewish people. Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch suggests that the Israelite's past become melded with stranger's past. In a sense, they share a destiny; the destiny of Israel. (See his comments, *ibid*)

The notion of a shared identity is not a simple concept. Residents of Israel, Jewish or not Jewish, would have to offer a sacrifice to God as an expression of gratitude for God's intervention in history and saving the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Were we to reverse this scenario and compel Jews to practice an idolatrous religious event in the land of our host, how would we respond?

The Paschal offering and Passover in general, is not exclusively a religious event; there is a nationalism attached to the day too. The link between this portion, which highlights the preparations for a move to our homeland, and Passover is strong. Passover represents freedom from tyranny; that freedom was not the end goal, but a means to an end of building a just society. When we view Passover from that perspective, the stranger and citizen become morally bound to celebrate Jewish freedom. The exodus from Egypt enabled a life of dignity and opportunity for all

residents of Israel. The Passover experience is not some ironic form of subjugation; it is a deepening of the experience of freedom.

Jews in the United States do not worship the American flag on July 4th or pray to the spirits of the dead on Memorial Day. Yet as residents of a country which has given sanctuary to Jewish identity, we are morally compelled to express gratitude on the days which celebrate the founding and defense of the nation.

Nationalism is often viewed as an evil, fascist concept. When we uplift the state, we can come to push down society. Debate over the encroachment of the state is raging today. However, the nation-state is not by nature unethical. Now Palestinians mark the anniversary of Israel's founding as the *nakba*, the tragedy. Imagine a time when the Palestinian community celebrates the 5th of *Iyyar* alongside Israelis as the realization of the hope of the human condition. An ethical Israel protects the dignity of every *Ger* and *Ezrach*, every stranger and citizen alike.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
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