

Ki Tissa Drash
October 15, 2022
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One Friday evening during the last century I had my bas mitzvah. In those days girls didn't have a bat mitzvah. I was the fourth girl in the history of my synagogue in Poughkeepsie, New York, to go through this new coming of age ceremony.

Bas mitzvah girls didn't learn to lead a Torah service. We didn't have an Aliyah to say the Torah blessings on Shabbat morning. We didn't learn to chant from the Torah or Haftorah.

What we did do was read a paragraph or two in Hebrew from a Chumash on Erev Shabbat - from the parasha that would be chanted the following morning from the Torah.

Then we read a short piece that we wrote, not about the parasha, but about something we learned, after which we read a few paragraphs acknowledging our family and guests. I remember very little about my bat mitzvah. But I do remember how my mother kept telling me, when I was practicing my

readings, not to swallow my words, to speak slower, and to enunciate. Her advice annoyed me. But that guidance was the best gift for this shy girl who swallowed her words.

So, you're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this. It's because the two paragraphs I read for my bat mitzvah, which was on September 29 in the middle of khol ha-moed of Sukkes (as we called it then), was from the parshiot we read today - Ki Tissa from Exodus and Pinhas from Numbers....

Ki Tissa, to me, epitomizes Torah, in that it encompasses human relations, emotions, and law - relationships between Aaron and the Israelites and between Moshe and Aaron, and the human emotions of frustration and anger. There is the relationship between Moshe and God, which also deals with emotions of frustration and anger - as well as supplications and admonitions. In addition, Ki Tissa tells of the Golden Calf, and of the giving of the law, the Ten Commandments - two times .

But what interests me here - in Ki Tissa - is Moshe's radiant face after he comes down Mount Sinai the second time, how his glowing face frightens

the people, and how he, from then on, veils himself except when he talks to God and when he relays God's words to the people.

Moses was up on top of Mount Sinai for 40 days, ate nothing and drank nothing. And he didn't have access to sunscreen. That's not why his gleaming face was a mystery. I'd like to delve into that, not now, but the next time we read Ki-Tissa, which will be on March 11, 2023.

Now I would like to talk about the joyous holiday we are celebrating. As you know, Sukkot is one of the 3 pilgrimage festivals mentioned in the Torah, the other two being Pesach and Shavuot. Unlike the two solemn holy days mentioned in the Torah - Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - the 3 pilgrimage holidays require celebrants to hold a festival in a place, which, according to (Deut 16:12), "the Lord will choose." *** The rituals associated with Sukkot, as written in the Torah, include animal sacrifices and grain offerings, as we read today.

To me, the oddest ritual of Sukkot is the Hoshanot, when congregants hold the lulav and etrog, walking in a line behind each other encircling the Torah, which is on the bimah, pleading to God to save them while intermittently shaking the lulav. Why do we do this?

If I had time, I'd answer this question with a detailed anthropological analysis, but I have to be brief here.

The lulav and etrog are called the arba minim, the 4 kinds, the etrog being the fruit of something called the hadar tree. Robert Alter writes that the hadar tree was a splendid or stately-looking tree, and that it was during the Second Temple period that the hadar tree's fruit became associated with the etrog. So the etrog is one part of the 4 kinds. The other 3 kinds are in what we call the lulav.

The lulav is composed of 3 branches of different types of foliage. According to Leviticus 23:40, these are branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook. The Torah says nothing about one of the branches being myrtle. Nor does the Torah say anything about binding the three together, holding them with the etrog, shaking them and parading

with them. This ritual of the lulav and the etrog came way later. And to make sense of this we have midrash, which really does not explain why we engage in this procession.

According to one midrash, the arba minim, the 4 kinds, represent 4 parts of the body: the palm as the spine; the myrtle as the eye; the willow the mouth - and the etrog the heart. Another midrash compares the lulav and etrog to 4 kinds of people, somewhat reminiscent of the 4 children in the Haggadah. You can read this midrash in Etz Hayim on the bottom of page 730 as a comment to verse 40.

So what's happening here? The 3 pilgrimage festivals - Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot - were originally pagan agricultural festivals. Sukkot was the fall harvest, the final harvest of the year. Each of these agricultural festivals gained an Israelite religious gloss once our nomadic ancestors, who were herders, became settlers, farmers, and traders in the Promised Land.

The religious gloss for the Sukkot agricultural festival is twofold: one is about the sukkah, the booth or hut. According to Torah, the sukkah was to remind us of our living in booths during our 40-year trudge from Egypt to

Eretz Israel. How could we nomads have lived in wooden booths for 40 years? Where would we get the wood in the desert? How could we carry disassembled heavy booths from place to place when the vast majority of the ex-slaves didn't have camels, mules, or horses? We didn't live in huts. We lived in tents.

However, if we look at Sukkot as an agricultural festival of the fall harvest, booths or huts provided respite for laborers working during hot sunny days in fields or vineyards. I realized that when I worked in a vineyard as a volunteer on a kibbutz. Such huts were and are especially important during the hard work of the harvest.

The other religious gloss for the Sukkot holiday is the lulav. Why is that? The lulav is a weird thing. Why would the Torah tell us to chop off branches of trees, when it doesn't tell us what to do with those branches?

So what do we do? We bind them together and we shake them. I haven't seen that written in the Torah. Imagine many people shaking the lulavim, as in the Hoshanot ritual when celebrants walk, shaking their lulavim, holding their sweet-smelling etrogim. Close your eyes. What does it sound like?

And what do we start praying for on the last day of Sukkot, starting on Shmeini Atzeret? Rain, of course.

After the dry months of spring and summer, rain is necessary for life, not only in Eretz Yisrael, but in California. So we chant Hoshanot, shaking the lulav, pleading to God to save us - with rain.

This Sukkot ritual is a celebration of our agricultural pagan past. It's a rain dance.

Good Shabbes un Good Yontiv

*** About that phrase regarding a place "that the Lord will choose" - I thought it was only in Deut. 16:12, but after writing the drash, I found this phrase in other places as well. Interesting - could be an article written by a Torah scholar, not me!