

Emor 5778

Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Or, if we consider the dynamic relationship between each of us and the Jewish holidays, which comes first: the inspiration we derive from a holiday or the amount of time we put into it? Put another way: Does the holidays exist for our benefit, or do we exist for theirs?

In our parsha this week the Torah delineates the sacred times of the year. As the English word 'holidays' indicates, these are not merely memorials to past events; they are holy, distinct from other days in what they represent and how they are experienced. The great sage Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that Judaism is a religion based on the sanctification of time. Time, he taught, gives meaning to events, not the other way around. When Shabbat and the festival days come, their sanctity is supposed to envelop us, filling our lives with light and warmth the way the morning sun does on a summer day.

But do they? While it is safe to assume that most Jews marked Passover with family gatherings for seder or by attending services, or both, and that most Jews will come together for High Holiday services in the fall, what about the other sacred occasions described in the Torah? Do they compel us to observance in the same way? Stop by on Shavuot in a few weeks and you'll see the answer. The sad reality is that we cannot rely on these days to impose their sanctity upon us. We are the ones who will mark them as sacred by paying them the attention they deserve; in return, they will sanctify us in the way that we deserve.

By commanding observance of the festivals, the Torah puts us in a funny kind of a spot. On the one hand, the holidays are intrinsic to the way the universe works: God has built them into the yearly calendar just as Shabbat is built into the week. They occur when they do whether

we recognize them or not. At the same time, we are commanded to do certain things on them. In the biblical period there were sacrifices on the altar; in our time there are communal services. Both then and now, it is the human actor who acknowledges the difference in these days. It is our response to their demands that will put their sanctity into play. In a kind of circularity of holiness – a chicken and egg scenario – we sanctify the holidays and, having set them apart, they sanctify us.

In modern America, we can all opt in or out of any religion or shared ritual at any time. We have the freedom to do so, and many Jews choose not to do anything; capriciousness is liberty's forlorn twin. By affirming every individual's right to choose for themselves as Americans, which is a positive value, religious communities lose sight of what we should feel compelling. When it comes to the holidays, Jews feel compelled by Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover, among those mandated in the Torah, and by Hanukkah and Purim, among the post-Toraitic traditions. But Sukkot, Shavuot and, to a degree, Shabbat, all of which have the same status as the High Holidays and Pesakh, do not compel us. As a result, their potential sanctity remains unfulfilled. There are multiple forces that shape the dynamic by which some holidays inspire while others remain leave us flat. I hope that by making the case for our own responsibility to create holiness on holy days that Jews will hear the message. Shavuot is coming; it is on par with Pesakh; let's come together for it for study, prayer and celebration at the annual Tikkun Leil Shavuot on the night of May 19, and on the mornings of May 20 and 21 for Yom Tov services. Let's respond to the innate sanctity of those days through action, studying and praying and eating like we know their importance.

Shabbat shalom