

Keeping Pace with the Whole Community of Israel

Shabbat Acharei Mot I 5776

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How strange: Passover is hardly behind us, and yet our Torah reading was about Yom Kippur, over five months away. Actually, that's not unusual. We work our way through the Torah, from the beginning of Genesis on Simchat Torah in the fall to the end of Deuteronomy the same time the next year, often reading about holidays months removed from their observance.

Tonight, though, is different from all other nights. You see, most weeks, we read the same portion as Jews throughout the world. This Shabbat, on the other hand, our Conservative and Orthodox friends outside of Israel are reading a special portion for the eighth day of Passover. Israeli Jews of all stripes are reading *Acharei Mot*, like us.

The reason is that Reform Jews everywhere, and all Jews in Israel, observe Passover for seven days, as prescribed in the Torah. Conservative and Orthodox diaspora Jews, on the other hand, celebrate an eighth day of Passover, in keeping with ancient custom. The reason is complicated.

In the Jewish calendar, each month begins with a new moon. A lunar cycle takes 29 or 30 days. In ancient times, before the calendar was fixed, each new moon was announced by the rabbinical court in Jerusalem. Messengers were dispatched throughout the land, and fire signals were transmitted across hilltops to distant territories, to get spread word that the new month had begun. That information was particularly important in months with a holiday. If you didn't know the date of the new moon, you knew that the holiday would occur on one of two days, but not exactly which. Unfortunately, enemies started sending the fire signals on the wrong day, confusing the Jewish community. Messengers could get the word out timely in Israel. Outside the land, once the fire signal system had failed, communities risked missing the correct day of a holiday. Therefore, a custom arose: Each holiday would be celebrated for an extra day outside the land of Israel. That way, they could be sure to celebrate on the correct day. An exception was made for days of fasting, to avoid hardship.

The fixed calendar was adopted more than a millennium ago. We no longer await a rabbinical court, fire signals, or even an email to know when the new

month begins. That would've solved the problem, if not for what Tevya says: "Tradition!" After much argument, the rabbis maintained the diaspora tradition of an extra day of each festival outside Israel.

Logic, though, is among the guiding principles of Reform Judaism, trumping tradition for its own sake. Our Reform founders wisely that we should observe each holiday for the number of days prescribed in the Torah – in the case of Passover, seven.

Israeli Jews, for whom Passover also ends this evening, resume the annual Torah cycle this Shabbat. Orthodox and Conservative diaspora communities read the special portion for the eighth day of Passover this week, and resume the annual journey through Torah next week. Israeli and diaspora synagogues won't be reading the same portion again until the second week of August. What's an American Reform Jew to do?

Reform custom has long been to adhere as closely as possible to the diaspora calendar. In order to do that, we divide one portion in half. This week, we read from the first half of *Acharei Mot*; next week, from the second. This phenomenon occurs whenever a holy day is on a Friday. The portions we end up reading for two weeks may not be especially thrilling, but we manage. By next week, we're reading the same portion as our Orthodox and Conservative neighbors.

Still, debates spring up among Reform rabbis, some urging that we adopt the Israeli cycle. "Why," my colleagues ask, "should we use a schedule of readings that based on a holiday calendar that we have rejected?" The argument is particularly compelling because the Israeli custom is legitimately based on observing holidays for the number of days that the Torah dictates.

I'm in the odd position of agreeing with this logic, but not following it. Many of our members travel regularly between local congregations and outside Central Arkansas. Some study Torah at one congregation and worship at another; or study and worship at more than one. Many study Torah on line, or receive weekly emails about the Torah portion, including from our Union for Reform Judaism, which adheres as closely as possible to the diaspora calendar. As a practical matter, having a different reading cycle from most diaspora Jews would be confusing – for several months, in this case.

An important Jewish value is also at stake: *Klal Yisrael*. That term, which means, “the whole community of Israel,” suggests that we are duty-bound, wherever possible, to maintain Jewish unity. One could certainly suggest that going with the Israeli calendar would be a legitimate way to observe this mitzvah. On the other hand, we live here, in America, and maintaining consistency with other Jews in our own land has merit, when the cost is not too high.

We face that issue in more important arenas than minutiae of the Torah cycle. For example, Our Orthodox friends who keep kosher place a priority on *Klal Yisrael* when they happily attend and volunteer but mostly can’t eat at the Arkansas Jewish Food and Cultural Festival. Similarly, we don’t complain when Jewish Federation events require kosher catering.

One example of our efforts to maintain *Klal Yisrael* is arising in the week ahead, as we observe Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, with our entire Jewish community. Three years ago, in the months before my family and I moved to Little Rock, I happened to be visiting here in transition on Yom HaShoah. I noticed that Chabad-Lubavitch wasn’t part of that observance; the next year, I asked why. Nobody had asked them. I suggested that we include our entire community in Yom HaShoah.

Two concessions have been made in order to include Chabad-Lubavitch in the observance.

First, we cannot have instrumental music during the service. You see, Yom HaShoah occurs between Passover and Shavuot, a period of semi-mourning in traditional Judaism – with several restrictions, including a ban on instrumental music – because the Roman Emperor Hadrian’s persecution of Torah scholars is said to have been most acute at this season. Rabbi Ciment graciously permits us to include an instrumental prelude, and doesn’t enter the room until that’s over. Some people surely miss singing *Ani Ma’amin* or *Dona Dona* with accompaniment. I’m one of them. But the sacrifice is worth it for *Klal Yisrael*.

Second, when the observance is held at the Temple, we conduct it in the Tenenbaum Center rather than in our Sanctuary. Our Ark doors are magnificent, but they don’t conform to traditional specifications, which require a curtain to conceal the Torah scrolls from view when the Ark is closed. Rabbi Ciment is therefore not permitted to sit down in our Sanctuary. Having him stand the whole time would not be comfortable for him or anybody else. Holding the service in the

Tenenbaum Center, like limiting instrumental music to the prelude, doesn't violate a bedrock principle for us, any more than dividing one Torah portion between two weeks.

Reform Jews, of course, should not be the only ones to make concessions for the sake of *Klal Yisrael*. A potent example is at Judaism's holiest site, the *Kotel*, or Western Wall in Jerusalem, which has been treated as an ultra-Orthodox synagogue for many years, with severe limitations of women's rights. Women have been beaten or arrested for praying as they wish, in the women's section – wearing a *tallit* or prayer shawl, for example, or reading from a Torah scroll. This winter, a compromise was achieved: The government agreed to establish a third section, *Ezrat Yisrael*, meaning “the Domain of all Israel,” where men and women can worship together, with full religious rights for all. However, most recently, ultra-Orthodox leaders have attempted to scuttle the arrangement, and Prime Minister Netanyahu has shamefully put the decision on hold. We must hold the Prime Minister accountable to the agreement he has already made, for the sake of *Klal Yisrael*, the whole people of Israel.

As we read this run-of-the-mill Torah portion over two weeks, we make a sacrifice, though not a huge one. Similarly, a compromise that establishes a mixed prayer section at the Western Wall, without diminishing the current Orthodox men's and women's sections in any way, is not a meaningful sacrifice for ultra-Orthodox Jews. Let this Shabbat and next be reminders to all the community of Israel that Jewish unity doesn't come cheap. Let our Yom HaShoah observance next Thursday evening send a powerful message that *Klal Yisrael* is worth preserving and even enhancing.

Amen.