Building the Third Temple

Shabbat Nachamu 5786

July 24, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

Three years ago, flying to Israel, I was seated next to an evangelical pastor from Indiana, leading a delegation from his congregation to the Holy Land. Upon learning that I'm a rabbi, he asked, "Isn't the breeding of the red heifer exciting?"

Oy.

Every year, Jewish tradition prescribes a series of special readings in the leadup to Purim and Passover. We observe all but one, Shabbat Parah. Literally "cow Shabbat," Shabbat Parah calls for reading a selection from the Book of Numbers describing a purification ritual that requires the sacrifice of an unblemished red heifer, whose ashes are mixed with water and other ingredients to make a purification potion. This process is required for people who have had contact with a dead body, which in ancient times made them impure and therefore ineligible for participation in the Temple's sacrificial service until purification.[i]

Of course, we don't believe that contact with a corpse conveys ritual impurity, but another reason we skip Shabbat Parah relates to the matter raised by my pastor seatmate. He was speaking of Jewish zealot extremists in Israel who have been working to breed an unblemished red cow so they may smooth the path toward rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. As the Temple Institute's website explains, "In our own times, the commandment of the red heifer takes on more and more significance. For without it, the Divine service of the Holy Temple cannot be resumed. There is a spiritual renaissance today in Israel; after almost 2,000 years, Israel is clearly moving towards the time when … the prophesied Third Temple - will be rebuilt." It goes on to emphasize that the messiah will only come after the Temple is rebuilt, and that can only happen with the heifer. The Temple Institute insists, "[T]he fate of the entire world depends on the red heifer. For G-d has ordained that its ashes alone are the single missing ingredient for the reinstatement of Biblical purity - and thereafter, the rebuilding of the Holy Temple."[ii]

Among its Frequently Asked Questions, the Temple Institute asks when construction of the Third Temple will begin. The begin by acknowledging that "the Temple Mount has to be cleared of the Dome of the Rock and the mosques which are presently located upon it before the physical rebuilding of the Holy Temple can begin." They go on to imagine that Muslims would acknowledge "the Mount as the intended location for the rebuilt Temple. With the acquiescence of the Moslem [sic] world, the Moslem [sic] structures currently on the Mount would be

disassembled and reassembled elsewhere." That, of course, is magical thinking, which the Temple Institute must realize, admitting "there are those who would like to jettison our obligations to G-d and relinquish the Temple Mount to the Moslems [sic]. However, at the same time there is a growing desire among the people of Israel to return to the Mount and rebuild the Holy Temple. This growing Temple consciousness is dependent upon education and awareness."[iii]

In 2023, I helped my pastor seatmate think about the world war that would result from knocking down the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque. I also explained that the folks seeking to rebuild the Temple represent a fringe element in Judaism. However, in the years that have followed, extremist Jewish messianism has grown. In the Occupied West Bank, vigilante violence by radical Jewish settlers is an attempt to "cleanse" the Greater Land of Israel of its Palestinian inhabitants. Within Israel proper, gang violence in Palestinian towns and villages, Palestinian on Palestinian violence, has persisted and worsened because of neglect by Israel's police under the leadership of cabinet minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, seeking to rid Israel of even its Palestinian citizens. Today, I could not as accurately tell the pastor that the Temple Institute represents a tiny fringe element.

Yesterday was Tisha B'Av, the annual commemorations of the destructions of Jerusalem's Temples—the first, by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E; and the second, by the Romans, in 70 C.E. Our tradition views both destructions as God's will, the Babylonians being God's agents in punishing the Israelites for idolatry, and the Romans taking advantage of שנאת חינם, groundless hatred among Jews. As if trying to prove the point that both remain destructive to the land and people of Israel, zealots have made an idol of an ethnically "cleansed" Israel and of the Temple itself, while Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud Party this week released an AI-generated commercial mocking his chief election rival by showing him running past a young man who resembles his son who was killed in action in Gaza and into the arms of an Israeli Arab politician. Extremists with messianic goals serving Jews only are not pursuing the redemption our world so sorely needs.

The Shabbat immediately following Tisha B'Av, this Shabbat, is called Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation. We read a Haftarah that begins נחמו נחמו עמי, "Comfort, comfort my people," words of a prophet consoling Israelites exiled to Babylon after the First Temple's destruction.

No doubt, some are comforted by reported successes in breeding an unblemished red heifer. By contrast, I found myself more comforted by the words of Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmur, a professor at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. In a podcast this week, Rabbi Marmur said that his favorite verse in the Book of

Lamentations, which is read on Tisha B'Av, is הביטו וראו אם יש מכאוב כמכאובי, "Look about and see: Is there any agony like mine?"[iv] It's a rhetorical question: There is **no** pain like that of the exiled Israelites whose Temple has been destroyed. Marmur correctly points out that some of his fellow Israelis, understandably traumatized by October 7, imagine themselves and the Jewish people more broadly to be uniquely persecuted. Marmur responds, יש מכאוב כמכאובי, "There **is** a pain like my pain…pain and grief that we were agents of, that we caused."[v]

Rabbi Marmur is suggesting that the greatest comfort may be in empathy. Yes, our Jewish people has suffered and continues to suffer—millennia of persecution, expulsion, and mass murder, with antisemitism frighteningly on the rise in our own day—but we are not the only people in pain. If we can acknowledge the anguish of our ancient ancestors whose holy Temple was destroyed, then we ought to be able to imagine the agony, not to mention the bloodshed, that would result from razing two of Islam's holiest sites to make way for a third Temple.

The Prayer for the State of Israel, in our prayer book and others, refers to the Jewish State as ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו, "the first flowering of our redemption." Those words celebrate modern Israel. They were important to Orthodox Zionists, who supported the establishment of the State in opposition to Ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists, who argued that our people's redemption could come only with a messiah sent by God, reestablishing the Temple and its sacrificial service. The birth of the State of Israel in 1948 did not fulfill messianic hope or end it. Instead, we are to see it as a step in the direction of redemption.

Rabbi Marmur teaches that some rabbis were hesitant about calling Israel "the first flowering of our redemption," instead praying, "**May it become** the first step in a process that leads to redemption."[vi] Salvation for the Jewish people will not be found by knocking down Muslim holy sites or by sacrifices of our herds, flocks, and crops. No, let us seek comfort instead from the great messianic hope enunciated by our prophets. Instead of breeding an unblemished red heifer, it's time to build trust between Israelis and Palestinians between Jews and Muslims worldwide, working toward a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore"[vii] –or, in the words of our American Reform founders, "the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all [humanity]."[viii]

That messianic age will never be achieved by destroying one people or one religion for another. Instead, as we acknowledged in our prayers tonight, "there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together."[ix]

Amen.

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[i] Numbers 19:1-22.
[ii] https://templeinstitute.org/red-heifer-introduction/.
[iii] https://templeinstitute.org/frequently-asked-questions/.
[iv] Lamentations 1:12.
[v] Michael Marmur, "Tisha B'Av in an Age of Jewish Power," *The Pluralist Podcast*, July 22, 2026.
[vi] Marumr. Translation in quotation marks is paraphrased.
[vii] Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 3:4.
[viii] Declaration of Principles, better known as "The Pittsburgh Platform," Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1885, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/.
[ix] Michael Walzer, in a poem adapted by the editors of *Mishkan T'filah*, CCAR Press, 2007, p. 157.