



Parshat Tetzaveh
Ezekiel 43:10-27
February 7, 2014 / 7 Adar 1 5774

When the 2nd Temple was destroyed, the rabbis of the time replaced the Biblical and Prophetic visions and understanding of the priesthood with a metaphor explaining that in the absence of a Temple and a functioning priesthood we, the people, were transformed into a nation of priests. This simple metaphor represented a huge theological leap because it defined the priesthood's function as somewhat less than necessary for spiritual development in modern times and placed the responsibility on the individual.

Of course, many of us are aware that up until the mid-19th century traditional Judaism refused to abandon the hope of a future Temple and in many circles today men still study the sacrificial system [hoping to live in a time when a newly rebuilt Temple would exist and the Cohanim would once again hold sway. I can just imagine my uncle Harry, who more than dabbled in real estate, deciding to divest himself of his property, move to Jerusalem and study ritual slaughtering. Ha!

On the other hand, if people living during the time of the first and second Temples believed the sacrificial system freed them from sin and brought them closer to God, then the rabbi's interpretation which was created several hundred years later, implied that the people no longer required a system of ritual sacrifice for spiritual elevation and that the priesthood was an antiquated institution.

I don't expect everyone to agree with that statement but I would hope that everyone would consider the theological implications of the metaphor.

The haftarah was written almost immediately following the destruction of the first Temple and clearly endorsed a sacrificial system but it also raises an important question. Ezekiel understands the Altar as place where heaven and earth meet and the priesthood as the group which mediates between them. If, however, we thrust Ezekiel's metaphor into post Temple rabbinic times, we are challenged to consider how in the absence of a Temple and sacrificial system can we find a balance between these two realms?

Each of us lives in so many worlds. We live in large increasingly secular and fundamentalistically oriented society and at the same time we strive to live in a world of ideas and deeds. Some of us also strive to live in a world of faith. Each of us, hopefully, are aware that we always walk between these two realms. Judaism continuously reinforces this concept and

challenges us to ask what is the proper way to act? How can difficult decisions be addressed in an ethical and moral way?

The rabbis transformed the Altar into a table. They reasoned that the place where one eats and gathers and shares and possibly decides how best to continue was the best classroom they could imagine. Warmer than a chapel or a sanctuary. A place filled with joy and ideas, singing and laughing and often times serious conversations. A place surrounded by blessings. A place between worlds.

1. How do you balance your world of ideals and deeds? Examples may give others thought to consider on this important question.
2. Do we engage in different 'sacrifices' today, rather than ritual slaughter, in order to fulfill mitzvot?
3. Can you provide an example (or examples) of how your dinner table became a classroom to teach your children or grandchildren, and provide specific examples?

From the Editors: Join the discussion of this commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Building A Successful Volunteer Culture: Finding Meaning in Service in the Jewish Community" Jewish Lights Publishing, and "Understanding the Haftarat: Everyperson's Guide."