

Parashat Tsav

In and among all the many mitzvot relating to the various sacrifices that are detailed in Parashat Tsav we find a fascinating little vignette about the consecration of Aharon as the High Priest. As we read, "Moshe brought Aharon and his sons, washed them with water, put the tunic on him, wrapped the sash around him, clothed him with the robe, put the ritual vest on him, wrapped around him the decorated belt and fastened the vest to him with it. He put the breastplate on him, and on the breastplate he put the urim and tumim. He set the turban on his head, and on the front of the turban he affixed the gold plate, the holy ornament, as Adonai had ordered Moshe. Then Moshe took the anointing oil and anointed the tabernacle and everything in it, thus consecrating them. He sprinkled some on the altar seven times, anointing the altar with all its utensils and the basin with its base, to consecrate them. He poured some of the anointing oil on Aharon's head and anointed him, to consecrate him. Moshe brought Aharon's sons, clothed them with tunics, wrapped sashes on them and put headgear on them, as Adonai had ordered Moshe." This account of Aharon's consecration, together with all the details of the sacrifices remind us that for many millennia, as we noted last week, the framework of Judaism was very different to how it is today. Today's Judaism is rabbi led and synagogue centred, but back in the times of the batei mikdash Judaism was led by priests and centred on the Temple. In fact the synagogue, together with rabbis, were actually innovated both during and after the period of first exile, since with both the Temple and Jerusalem in ruins, the exiled Jews sought a structure that would facilitate not only their coming together, but their understanding of and practice of Torah - the lack of which, so it was surmised, had been a fundamental cause of the exile. As and when our people returned to Eretz Yisrael under Ezra and Nechemyah they not only rebuilt the Temple and re-established the priesthood and sacrifices, but they brought the synagogue with them. This actually made sense given the difficulty that many people, living at distance from Jerusalem, had in visiting the Temple. Most people would worship on a weekly basis in their local synagogue, hearing the Torah being read and expounded there, and would then go up to Jerusalem and to the Temple as and when it was specifically required by the mitzvot. But although the Temple and synagogue existed side-by-side in ancient Judea, it has to be said that the relationship between the two was not entirely harmonious. The Prushim and Torah Teachers predominated in the synagogues and thus tended to be more populist (they were regarded as or at least regarded themselves as the party of the people), while the Tzudkim, composed mainly of priests and the ruling aristocracy, dominated within the Temple. In the First Century the latter tended to rub shoulders with the governing Roman elite and were more open to Hellenistic influence. They rejected the Oral Tradition and insisted on a literal interpretation of the written Torah. The Prushim, by way of contrast, believed that the Oral Torah had been given to Moshe at Mount Sinai along with the written Torah. Contrary to the Tzudkim the Prushim believed in an after life, in a Messiah and in an End Time judgement of all people. Since the bulk of these ideas held by these two different groups were mutually exclusive it was natural that this theological divide engendered great animosity and tension. While Judaism prizes family and community above all else, it's certainly true to say however that Judaism in the Second Temple period

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was far from harmonious. In fact, the sectarian friction between the Prushim and Tzudkim - and other groups - was such that blood was often shed. During the days of the Hasmonean King Alexander, for example, open rebellion broke out at a memorable Sukkot when Alexander, who was of the Tzudkim, was officiating in the Temple as King-Priest. Showing his contempt for the P'rushim, he poured out the water libation at his feet instead of on the altar, as prescribed by the P'rushim's ritual. The Prushim there in the Temple, enraged at this impious act, pelted Alexander with etrogs and Alexander replied by calling upon his soldiers to restore order, slaughtering hundreds of the defenceless Prushim in the process. The dispute got further out of hand and resulted in open civil war. The P'rushim invited the king of Syria to aid them and together they forced Alexander into hiding in the Judean hills. However, fearing that the Syrians would claim Judaea as the fruit of victory, and thinking that Alexander and his Tzudkim supporters had been sufficiently punished, thousands of the P'rushim deserted the Syrian army and went over to Alexander with the result that the Syrians were defeated by this realignment of forces. But Alexander was less than gracious in his victory and, not content to let things lie, he instituted a hunt for the leaders of the rebellion, making a horrible example of those he caught. He consequently enjoyed a victory banquet with his fellow Tzudkim leaders at which 800 P'rushim were crucified in the presence of his celebrating guests. At this point it is pertinent to mention a third major group within Second Temple Judaism - the Essenes - who were generally so disgusted by the Prushim and Tzudkim that they took themselves off into the Judean desert with the purpose of living in splendid holy isolation. In particular the Essenes believed that the priesthood and Temple had become corrupted, calling the High Priest and his followers the Sons of Darkness.

And yet, that said, Second Temple Judaism was just about held together by, ironically and paradoxically, the Temple, the priesthood and the sacrifices. Far from being the embarrassment that these structures seem to be to Jews today (as we observed last week), and in spite of the sectarian tensions and power struggles, after all was said and done the Temple and its sacrifices provided some kind of gravitation force that kept these Judaisms, like constantly squabbling siblings, under the same roof. Even if, for example, the Essenes called the High Priest and his followers 'the Sons of Darkness' it was nevertheless the case that they did not reject the idea of the Temple, the priesthood and the sacrifices. On the contrary, as the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate, they were absolutely committed to Temple, priesthood and sacrifices, just not as they were presently practiced. Of course there was another group that I haven't mentioned yet, but which only featured for around thirty years before the cataclysmic events of the first Jewish Revolt - the Messianic Jews. It goes without saying that for at least seventy or so years the majority of followers of Yeshua were not Gentile in origin, but were Jews. As Ray Pritz, the author of 'Nazarene Jewish Christianity' has written in this respect: ""All the first Christians were Jews, either by birth or by conversion, and yet within a hundred years of the report that tens of thousands 'from the circumcision' had believed in Jesus as Messiah, there remained only small, despised pockets of Jewish Christians, and of these a large percentage seem to have been adherents to various late-blooming hybrids of Christian teaching with that of some free-thinking individual." To speak

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of these followers of Yeshua as 'Christians' at all is actually quite confusing since this term is anachronistic and refers to a religious paradigm that did not exist until the Second Century CE. They themselves certainly never called themselves Christians. Indeed, further contrary to popular Christian opinion, it must also be said that these disciples of Yeshua were devoted to the Temple, the priesthood and its sacrifices. And little wonder, since Yeshua was too. In Yochanan's besorah we therefore read, "It was almost time for the festival of Pesach in Y'hudah, so Yeshua went up to Yerushalayim. In the Temple grounds he found those who were selling cattle, sheep and pigeons, and others who were sitting at tables exchanging money. He made a whip from cords and drove them all out of the Temple grounds, the sheep and cattle as well. He knocked over the money-changers' tables, scattering their coins; and to the pigeon-sellers he said, "Get these things out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market?" (His talmidim later recalled that the Tanakh says, "Zeal for your house will devour me.") So the Judeans confronted him by asking him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove you have the right to do all this?" Yeshua answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again." The Judeans said, "It took 46 years to build this Temple, and you're going to raise it in three days?" But the "temple" he had spoken of was his body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his talmidim remembered that he had said this, and they trusted in the Tanakh and in what Yeshua had said." So, rather than being against the Temple, the sacrifices and the priesthood, the besorot not only reveal Messiah to have been a regular visitor at the Temple but that, like the Essenes perhaps, he had a burning zeal for its purity. And why not? He'd been visiting the Temple since his youth! And this zeal naturally rubbed off on his talmidim, such that even after his resurrection we read that they continued "faithfully and with singleness of purpose to meet in the Temple courts daily" - *their* practice reflected *his* teaching. In fact, almost thirty years later, when Rav Shaul visited Yerushalayim, as Acts 22 further illustrates, the Jerusalem community was found to be continuing in this zeal for 'God's house'.

Such was the Jewish world of the First Century. It was a fiercely sectarian world in which subjects such as the Temple, the priesthood and the sacrifices at the same time divided and coagulated the otherwise disparate groups in Judaism. Imagine then the cataclysmic effect upon Judaism when Temple, priesthood and sacrifice, were all swept away upon the failure of the Jewish Revolt of 67 CE! Although these groups often warred over the Temple, priesthood and sacrifices, the very fact that they existed was taken by all as tangible proof of Israel's election. The failure of Jewish ambitions for a sovereign theocratic Jewish state not only removed this stabilising element altogether from Judaism, but, as Josephus, a witness to the conflagration and himself the one time leader of the Jewish forces in the Galilee, subsequently wrote, the sudden and violent removal of Temple, priesthood and sacrifice appeared to suggest that God was finished with his people and had abandoned his covenants. Indeed, commenting upon this Josephus wrote that it was not so much a Roman hand that had caused the Temple to burn to the ground, but God's hand, because "It had been condemned to the flames by God long ago." In other words, God had acted on the side of the Romans. Even as the ashes of the Temple were being blown to the four winds,

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attempts were being made to rationalise what all this meant. In the first instance the revolt was an utter disaster for the Jews. Josephus estimated the number of Jewish dead in Judea at one million and towns and cities up and down the Land had been laid waste. Moreover, large numbers of the rebels were carried off by the Romans into slavery. The Arch of Titus commemorated the Roman victory and recorded the mournful procession of defeated Jewish slaves, together with ritual vessels from the Temple, through the streets of Rome. Jews and Judaism had been humiliated, and it seemed to all, including even to Jews like Josephus, that God had switched sides - from the Jews to the Romans - his dwelling presence from Jerusalem to Rome. Not only had the Temple been destroyed, along with priesthood and sacrifices, together with hopes of a sovereign theocratic Jewish state, but, to rub salt into the Jewish wound, the Romans forbade their reconstruction. Moreover, they shortly thereafter introduced a tax on all Jews, the *fiscus Judaicus* that was further designed to humiliate. This was the equivalent of the half shekel tax that Jews had previously paid to maintain the Jerusalem temple. The proceeds of the *fiscus Judaicus* however went not to Jerusalem but to the maintenance of the Temple of Jupiter in Rome - an outrage to any religious Jew. Everywhere throughout the Empire Jews became a pariah people and Judaism a pariah religion, prompting further revolts by Jews, which were ruthlessly put down, in disparate parts such as North Africa. The war not only swept away the Temple, the priesthood and sacrifices, together with the Essenes and Tzudkim, but it also removed the authority of the Judean Messianic Jewish community which had been scattered and dispersed. Indeed, like Josephus and the Romans, many gentile believers concluded that the loss of Temple, priesthood and sacrifice, together with the scattering of the Torah observant Jewish believers in Jerusalem, constituted a sea change in the landscape of faith in Yeshua. As a consequence they began to look away from Jews and Judaism as the paradigm with which to make sense of their faith. Indeed, shortly after the failed war the writer of the Epistle of Barnabas, in anticipation of the anti-Judaism of the Church Fathers, wrote that "that both the sacrifices and the Torah had been done away with forever, being replaced by a so-called 'new-law of Christ'. Circumcision too had been abolished and replaced by the circumcision of the heart which evidenced itself in the particular Gentile ability to respond to the gospel, for "He hath circumcised our ears, that we [Gentiles] might hear His word and believe, for the circumcision in which they [the Jews] trusted is abolished. For He declared that circumcision was not of the flesh, but they transgressed because an evil angel deluded them."

All of this, then, was happening at the time that Yochanan penned his Revelation. Indeed, it was this immediate context that *prompted* the Revelation. It was not, as some suppose, a Revelation that was specifically written to the later Gentile Church with *Christian* concerns in mind. Christians today look to Revelation as some kind of map of *their* future. But that was not the original purpose of the Revelation. On the contrary, it was a Revelation that was specifically intended to bring succour and solace to *Jews* who, having lost everything, were now wondering what future there remained for them as a people and as a faith. With Jerusalem and all Judea lying in rubble; with the ashes of the Temple blown to the wind; with the priesthood slaughtered; with Jews enslaved and exiled and with Roman persecution of

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Jews all around the Empire, the great anxiety in Jewish hearts prompted them to question whether this might not constitute the end of everything. Was this perhaps the Apocalypse? The Armageddon? Had God indeed, as everyone was saying, abandoned them? Had He abandoned His covenants? Would the forces of HaSatan conquer after all? It was also a Revelation which specifically spoke to the anxieties of Messianic Jewish believers who, scattered and persecuted along with their brethren *as Jews*, wondered not only what the future held for them but feared for the centrality of Jewish identity and practice within the Yeshua movement - Rome now becoming ascendant. It was thus therefore that, using a literary style that was typical of Jewish apocalyptic, the Revelation of Yochanan spoke comfortingly of a New Jerusalem (not a new Rome) descending from Heaven, in which the Shkinah - the dwelling presence of God - would indeed reside. It is in this context that the Revelation speaks of the final fulfilment of the promise that God made to Avraham concerning our people: "I saw the holy city, New Yerushalayim, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "See! God's Sh'khinah is with mankind, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and he himself, God-with-them, will be their God." Moreover, the then decimated, scattered and humiliated Jewish people would be all together as one under the priesthood of the perfect Messiah - not the corrupt priesthood of old. Indeed, Yeshua is described, as in our parashah, as wearing the garb of the High Priest: "I saw seven gold menorahs; and among the menorahs was someone like a Son of Man, wearing a robe down to his feet and a gold band around his chest. His head and hair were as white as snow-white wool, his eyes like a fiery flame, his feet like burnished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, out of his mouth went a sharp double-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength" Indeed there would also be sacrifice in the perfect age to come, but not the inefficient sacrifice of the old Temple, rather the perfect sacrifice of a sinless lamb - Mashiach himself! For "You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals; because you were slaughtered; at the cost of blood you ransomed for God persons from every tribe, language, people and nation. You made them into a kingdom for God to rule, cohanim to serve him; and they will rule over the earth." Then I looked, and I heard the sound of a vast number of angels — thousands and thousands, millions and millions! They were all around the throne, the living beings and the elders; and they shouted out, "Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and praise!"

Not only did the Revelation foresee a wonderful future of a restored, heavenly Jerusalem, upheld by the priestly sacrificial offering of the Messiah, but the enemies of the Jewish people, who had so long sought her destruction, symbolised by a dragon, and who were at the time of writing ascendant would finally be destroyed. Indeed, it was promised that "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will no longer be any death; and there will no longer be any mourning, crying or pain; because the old order has passed away." Imagine the encouragement that this verse gave to a people who had been so ravaged and persecuted! Thus to the question that hung over Jewish heads at that time, like a sword of Damocles, as

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to whether this was perhaps the end of the Jews, the Revelation answered decisively in the negative! For yes, there would be a future for the Jews and Judaism, and that future would be more glorious than they could ever imagine! Indeed, their victory would be so complete that though presently defeated and humiliated in the future multitudes from the nations would come to the light of the God of Israel!

What a wonderful repost the Revelation was and is! What a wonderful reassurance it still is! It was and is a message of hope and of consolation that, as Yirmeyahu, wrote sometime earlier as he too sat among the rubble of the first temple: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." And what goes for us as a people we can take too for ourselves. Whatever your situation, whatever your fears and anxieties, however destruction has ravaged your life, even if you sit among the rubble and ashes, the Revelation assures us that in the end all shall be well!