

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Shabbat Pesakh

The Jewish world acknowledged a special event this week. According to tradition, on Wednesday, the sun rose in the exact same space on the horizon, as it did at the very beginning of creation. This happens every 28 years. It was unique this year because rarely does it happen on the eve of Passover. Jews all over the world gathered at sunrise to pay homage to this great moment -- the event called "birkat hachama - blessing of the sun." Now, many of you know that I am not one for doing ritual for the sake of ritual, and you know how out of joint my nose gets when people who are not ritualists claim not to be religious -- just because they are not ritualists. This one made all sorts of light bulbs go off in my head, this one ... I just do not understand. I first learned of this event by reading a statement from a colleague who proclaimed that this coincidence of the sunrise and Passover has only happened three times in history. Well, the next article I read answered this concern by pointing out that while it is rare, it happens far more frequently (I believe the last time was 1925). Another sage spoke of the coincidence as being miraculous, since the Exodus from Egypt actually happened during this event. Well, that one is not right, either. So, I had to start thinking about this event and figuring out how to observe (or not observe) it appropriately.

And, here is where I get into trouble. The first thing that struck me was that we are not biblical literalists. We don't believe that the creation story of the bible is actually the story of creation. Seven days or seven million years, who really knows? Was Adam the first man, or is "ha-adam" a generic term for human creation? And who was there to know, after all? So how can we reject the notion that the creation story of the bible is history and then celebrate -- with religious homage -- the sun being in the exact position the bible claims that it was?

Quandary number two came when I tried answering this question. The Bible does say when the world was created - it is Rosh Hashanah. If we are to celebrate the sun being in its place at the dawn of creation, shouldn't we be celebrating creation as we acknowledge this event? And, if we choose to obey the Torah's command to celebrate creation at a different time (Rosh Hashanah) of what religious relevance is the placement of the sun? Either Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, or our world's birth needs to be tied to the cycle of the sun.

This leads me to quandary number three. If God created the world before the sun (as per Genesis One), then it did not rise at the dawn of creation, it was put in place by God. The sun was a fourth day creation, while the earth is mentioned in the very first verse of the Torah ("... darkness covered the face of the earth"). I am left wondering why we needed to create a holiday event to celebrate a sunrise that is inconsistent with the rest of our tradition, when every day, we need to wake and be thankful that it rose, at all.

Passover is a holiday when we commit to throwing off the chains of oppression. Yet, so many cling tightly to the most oppressive of chains ... the chains of dogmatic religious interpretation. Randomly, but judgmentally, we accept and reject religious traditions and then hold the religion accountable for our choices, and so many of these choices find their only authenticity in that, "I was told this was part of our tradition." Where we believe that we are more or less authentic because of what someone else told us are the correct "marching orders," then we blaspheme before God and abdicate our status as being people of faith. Religion is not as much about what you do, it is about who you are, what you believe, and most importantly - why you do what you do. Authenticity in faith is found in living with integrity. I am not saying that ritual is unimportant. I am saying that to accept ideologies or perform rituals just because they exist, or worse because someone else has judged them authentic -- serves only to bring us

back into Egypt. We once again will find ourselves serving another human master - the one who mandates what we have to do and to be -- in his/her eyes -- religiously authentic.

I do believe we need to have a sunrise festival that celebrates creation - 365 days a year, for each day is a brand new step in its process, and for each day, the sun is aligned in the very same place it was on many anniversaries of miraculous events in creations' process, but to single out one day and pretend for that one moment that we accept a dogma that we reject the remaining 27 years 364 days of each solar cycle just bothers me. It works for some; that is okay with me, so long as it is okay with them that it does not for me. Rabbi Avraham Kook taught us that the old must be made new, and the new must be made holy. We cannot observe or believe just because that is the way things have been done or others have believed. We have to be intentional about owning our faith and living a life that finds itself rooted in the search for our own authentic divine embrace. And on that day, when we each find the place where heaven and earth touch within us, God will be one and God's name will be one. Shabbat Shalom.