



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Emor 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

May 10, 2008

Sarah, a member of my congregation, once explained to me why she was proudly a “bad Jew.” She had hated her traditional religious upbringing. As soon as she left home she proudly embraced a fully secular lifestyle. Although she eventually found her way back to Judaism through belonging to a liberal synagogue, Sarah told me that she was a member purely for cultural reasons, because of her connection to Jewish social justice values, and she still eschewed any form of religious observance.

“Let me tell you how ‘bad a Jew’ I truly am. Every Shabbos morning,” she told me, “I sleep late. Then I make bacon for breakfast and eat it slowly, savoring the smell and the flavor, while reading the paper and catching up on how to be involved in world events. I look forward to that moment all week long.”

“I hate to break this to you,” I told her, “but it sounds to me like you are keeping Shabbos!”

“On six days work may be done,” we read in this week’s portion, “but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion.”¹ When Sarah sets aside time that feels sacred to her, both for her own pleasure and to connect empathetically to people in the world around her, she unwittingly keeps the most essential commandment of Shabbat.

Parshat Emor contains 63 of the Torah’s 613 *mitzvot*, many of which direct us on how to sanctify time. Chapter 24 of *Vayikra* deals with the laws of Shabbat and holiday observance. In this chapter we learn about the timing of the Jewish calendar – when to eat *matzah*, when to blow the *shofar* and when to observe other annual rites. Yet, buried within this lavishly detailed chapter we find a seemingly anomalous verse: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I, the Eternal One, am your God.”²

This verse contains one of the most famous commandments of the Torah—the *mitzvah* of *pe’ah* (leaving the corners of our fields for the poor), which is the underpinning for many of the contemporary laws of *tzedakah* (just giving). Why is this injunction to feed the poor found among detailed rules for celebrating the Sabbath and festivals?

The placement of this verse offers insight into the true meaning of Jewish holiness. The Hebrew word for holiness, *kedusha*, literally means set aside, designated as different. In this portion, the obligations to sanctify space and time are woven together. We sanctify our time by putting aside our daily occupations and designating Shabbat and holy days as sacred. We sanctify space by putting aside the corners of our “field” for those in need due to poverty or estrangement.

When Sarah reads the paper and cooks “Shabbos bacon,” she is taking a first step toward fulfilling the vision of this portion. She is making the day holy by setting aside time for her own version of a sacred moment. She is also

¹ Vayikra 23:3

² Vayikra 23:22

engaging with the concept of sacred space by reading about world events. However, Sarah (like most of us) is only beginning to express the values of this portion. The sanctification of time and the sanctification of space are inextricably bound through action.

What if we make the values of the Torah real by binding together our celebrations of Shabbat, holy days and other joyous occasions with setting aside corners of our modern-day fields (our money and resources) with concrete actions that meet the needs of others? What if we allocate ten percent of the money we put into our weddings and *bnai mitzvah* to feed those in need in our neighborhoods? What if every time we plan a holiday meal in our congregation, our synagogue also supports a community in the Global South in need of food?

In the coming year, may our holidays be holy in the fullest sense of the word – a moment when we set aside both time and space for our own sacred delight, as well as an opportunity to express our radical compassion for the needs of others through acts of justice and giving.



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