

Stones and Bones
Parashat Tzav
March 14, 2014

Happy Pi Day. I don't recall observing March 14th in this way when I was growing up, nor especially, pausing on 3/14 at 1:59 PM to contemplate the mathematical quirks of the universe, but it does seem to be part of my children's education. And a celebration, where they acknowledge the abstract concept "pi" by indulging in the very particular and caloric homonym "pie."

A story is told of a Conservative rabbi who, while on vacation in Hawaii, decides to... let loose, and order a menu item he had never tried before. To his horror and chagrin, as he is sitting at his table waiting for his food to arrive, a prominent member of his congregation whom he had no notion was anywhere within thousands of miles, walked in to the same restaurant, saw the rabbi, and immediately pulled up a chair. Sweating, panicked, the rabbi wonders what to do. Moments later the waiter walks over and places the ordered item on the table. The rabbi, beet red, exclaims: "Oh my goodness! Order a baked apple in this place and look at how they serve it!"

My friends, the part of Leviticus we read this week does involve roasting and grilling, although, to be fair, a barbeque pig appears nowhere in the portion. Our Biblical heritage is detailed and specific about the menu items of the sacrifices, and how they are to be prepared. But the interpretation of this portion in later tradition is, in its own way, a desperate but also brilliant attempt to make the best out of a rapidly changing situation.

The ancient Temple was a place of meeting and mediation, between the mundane and the sacred, the ordinary and extraordinary, indeed, between the human and the Divine. It was focal point and funnel, perceived as the uniquely proper place for the intersection and interaction between heaven and earth.

But then came Bavel, and later came Rome. Twice the sacred site was built, and twice it was brought down. With the Temple in ruins, the cult in flames, what would happen between us and God? Where would we meet, and how would we connect?

It takes the Talmud to transform Judaism into something profoundly different from its Biblical roots, and its literal level. We read in Tractate Menachot: “All who occupy themselves in Torah have no need for the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, nor for the guilt offering.” It is hard to convey just how... amazing this move was. After all, it moves us from the actual *content* of the Torah... to the *concept of* Torah.

In this week’s portion we read “*zot Torah haOlah*; this is the *Torah* of the burnt offering.” The word Torah here originally meant one specific law, but its usage was an opportunity, an invitation to read into this a reference to the entire work. So, using the word as a hook, the Chasidic commentator Simcha Bunem of Przysucha notes that the words “this is the Torah of the burnt offering’ means *the principle* of the burnt offering. Better that they should learn the Torah of the burnt offering than that they bring one.” It is true, we no

longer can offer a sacrifice. But in what we say and how we say it... we can get at a deeper meaning and purpose than even the original act itself.

On the one hand this is nothing more than making lemonade out of lemons. Easy to say it is better to use words than offer up an animal... at a time when offering up an animal was not possible. This was a question of finding new meaning or facing irrelevance, of transformation or dissipation.

On the other hand, though, it was a radical innovation. It is like change prescriptions, getting a new set of glasses. We now use a literary lens, and thus learn the power and potential of words.

We know, for example, that the old adage is a lie. "Sticks and stones may break our bones," but words can do damage and cause a great deal of harm as well.

Before we bring it closer to home, an example, from the Middle Ages. At a time of schisms and divisions within the Jewish community and arguments about its borders and boundaries, the great sage Maimonides was asked what the attitude of mainstream Jews should be towards sectarians, those groups that are related to but not-quite in the Jewish world. In particular, he was asked about how to deal with Karaites, that group which followed the Hebrew Bible but did not view the Talmud as authoritative. This is a divide, we should note, probably even greater than that between Orthodox and Reform Jews of our time. This was a serious question: should Karaites be treated as Jews? Or even dealt with at all? Should Shabbat be set aside to circumcise a Karaite

child? Should we visit their homes or drink their wine, things we would not do at the time with those we considered idolators.

And the Rambam replies that we should “follow the course of humility and the ways of truth and peace. That is, insofar as they, too, act decently towards us, and avoid maligning contemporary rabbis [whose authority they did not acknowledge], insofar as they take care not to ridicule the teachings of our rabbis whose teachings we follow [although they do not], we ought to respect them, greet them, visit their homes, circumcise their sons – even on Shabbat – bury their dead and console their mourners.”

Deep ideological divisions and serious divergences in practice are secondary to our basic relationship... so long as the words we use are supportive, so long as we do not cut and tear at that which is important to the other. How we speak about each other... is far more significant... than what each of us may do when we are apart.

And now to us.

I don't know if things are worse in the world of words than they were in the 1950's, at the heart of the McCarthy hearings and when neighbors lived in fear of one another. But it seems to me we are so deeply divided, we Americans, and also, we Jews... and what we hear said is so hurtful, so hateful. Are we on the same planet, between red state and blue state, between ultra-Orthodox and non-practicing Jews, or in any of the other conflicts and

divisions in our lives? And we live in an echo chamber of self-reinforcing media, in which what we already believed is bounced back at us by our own choice on dial or screen. The sacrifice on the altar of old was consumed by fire – and we call a frontal attack by email.. “flaming” someone.

What is the Torah of the burnt offering for our time? What would my teaching be for this day and age? I have an offering, a request. Tomorrow night is Purim, when up is down and good is bad and we are told to reach a point when we cannot tell the difference. Blurring boundaries is good every once in a while. Perhaps it is a reminder that the categories in our lives are not always absolute.

So let’s take that moment...and look beyond it. When Purim is done, this coming week, let us try to engage in an offering of *lashon hatov*, of good words about one another. Each day this week, try to say something respectful, understanding, compassionate... about someone you usually would not think so well of. If you are watching television or listening to the radio... tune to the “other” station. You know which one I mean. And not just to see what the “enemy” is saying, but to hear what moves... our fellow citizens. Listen for a few moments... looking not for weakness but for connection. If you happen to be running for office, find something right and respectful and positive to say about those who are vying for the same position...even for part of the time. If you are struggling with an estranged family member, having a hard time at work, facing a challenge in a friendship, take a moment to look through other

eyes, or at least say something kind instead of cutting, at least for part of the time.

I don't mean we should change who we are. But as an example, I will never forget something I heard a number of years ago from Rabbi David Saperstein, the head of our Reform movement's Religious Action Center. He said, once, about the so-called Religious Right, that he thought they were asking all the right questions, things the liberal left was basically ignoring. He went on to say that he did not agree with any of their answers. Okay. But he found a way to begin... from a place of understanding, sympathy and commonality...in an otherwise divided world.

To make yourself say something nice about someone who is different and with whom we struggle... means we will have to find something nice to say. If we make that effort honestly... we will even mean it.

This is the Torah of the olah, the sacrifice that can take us from heat to warmth, from fire to light, and maybe, even, someday, from standing in a place of separate truth... to a space of shared peace.

Shabbat Shalom.