

parshat Pinhas **(2016)**

This morning's Torah-reading consisted of a run-through of the special days of the year, including *Shabbat* and *Rosh Hodesh*, the three seasonal festivals, and the holy days at the beginning of the Seventh Month.

Maybe, like myself, in reading it, your thought focused on what is missing in it. There is no intimation of what those same occasions grew to become over time. We hear nothing, for example, of the Shabbat as a day of joy, of prayer and reflection, as a day on which we can go deeper into our own selves and relate to the wonder of existence itself, as a day associated with light and with togetherness, a day enveloped in song.

We hear nothing in the days at the beginning of the seventh month, the month of Tishri, as a time of thoughtful self-examination, a time to examine oneself and one's life and deeds and attitudes, in a way that allows for a sense of renewal, of spiritual and psychological rebirth. We hear nothing of the *Pesah* in terms of the *Seder*, a family-event with its rich traditions and practices and songs.

Instead, we hear in this reading only a list of sacrifices, rites in which animals are slaughtered, their blood splashed by the priests on the corners of the altar.

The idea of sacrifices was not an innovation of the Torah; sacrifices were a norm of the cultic life of all the pagan religions of the ancient Near East where such sacrificial worship took place in a temple, built as a house of the particular god or goddess to whom such sacrifices were made.

What our ancestors experienced in connection with those sacrificial rites two millenia ago or more, might well be impossible for us to even grasp, let alone, experience for the reason that we live in a totally different world and share in a totally different mindset.

Over the centuries, Jews found in the calendar and its occasions more than a schedule of sacrificial rites; they discovered in it a language of the soul

And with the Destruction of the Temple by the Romans, the Rabbis drew upon two settings that had developed on the scene – the Synagogue and the House of Study and made those, rather than the Temple, central to our life as a people.

On the eve of the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees, under Ben Zakkai, as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi of the Hebrew University just recently wrote, molded "forms of worship, of ethics and of culture that flourished in the substitute places where prayer could be performed without sacrifice, where God's glory filled the universe and not just one small edifice on one small hill."

There is an interesting talmudic passage (bt. Makot, 10a), commenting on a verse from the Psalms, "A day in your courts is better than a thousand!" (Psalm 84:11) The passage read in those words God's telling David that one day in which he engages in the study of Torah is more preferable to God than a thousand sacrifices that his son Solomon would (some day) offer on the altar!" Solomon, David's son, built the First Temple and in this talmudic excerpt, his father, David, represents the world of rabbinic study and interpretation, which evolved and survived the *Hurban (Destruction)*.

If you have been following recent happenings in Israel, more and more people committed precisely to re-building the Temple and restoring the sacrificial cult as it existed two millennia ago have been making the headlines.

There is ever-greater conflict and commotion concerning *har ha-bayit*, the Temple Mount.

And when the Israeli Prime Minister appointed Avigdor Lieberman to the post of Defense Minister, which had been held by Moshe Ya'alon, the latter, in protest, resigned from his Knesset seat. And the vacated Knesset-seat then went to Yehuda Glick. For the last decade, Yehudah Glick was director of the Temple Institute (*Makhon Beit haMikdash*), an organization that, since 1987, has been fashioning the utensils of the Temple-altar and the priestly garments and fosters a determination to rebuild the Temple and renew its sacrificial worship in which those utensils and garments would be used. And that is only one of a number of organizations striving toward that same general goal.

Strangely, the followers of such groups are undeterred by the detail that the building of a Temple would involve the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, a central eighth-century Moslem shrine, something that, among other things, could almost certainly ignite a holy war involving the entire Islamic world, if not another World War. Until recently, Israel's chief rabbis have declared that Jews should be not go up on the Temple Mount lest, in their state of ritual impurity, they might step upon the holiest spot in the ancient Temple, but recently the Ashkenazic chief-rabbi, David Lau, came out with a statement about rebuilding the Temple.

On the eve of *Pesah* this year, a number of people had been held by police for trying to smuggle animals onto the Temple Mount in order to slaughter and sacrifice them there. And a much larger group gathered within sight of the Mount for a "practice-run" in which they slaughtered a sheep. Many of them wore T-shirts on which a wrecking-ball was directed toward the Dome on the Rock, with the words, "Remove the debris!" And an honored guest for that "practice-run" was Yehuda Etzion, who in the 1980's spent five years in prison for an attempt to explode the two Moslem shrines on the Mount.

While those people view the rebuilding of the Temple and restoring the sacrificial rites as fulfilling a Divine command, one which they read very literally, others view resurrecting that ancient form of worship as nothing less than a form of idolatry.

Gershom Scholem, one of the most outstanding Jewish scholars of the twentieth-century, had said that the real test of Zionism is whether it can achieve its practical, political goals without having to bear the burden of mythic associations traditionally associated with the Jewish return to the Land. And he enumerated two such dangerous, even catastrophic associations: the renewal of the ancient Davidic kingdom and dynasty, and the rebuilding of the Temple.