A Brief Biblical History of Time

Parashat Emor, Leviticus, Chapters 21-24 | May 12, 2022

Time travel is a popular theme in cinematic entertainment, but I had always assumed that it was limited to the realm of fiction. So it was with surprise that some years ago, I came upon this headline in the *New York Times*: "Time Travelers to Meet in the Not Too Distant Future." The story described a conference on time travel being held at MIT. The organizers, led by a graduate student named Amal Dorai, invited a number of prominent scientists to discuss the conceptual aspects of traveling through time, but there was a twist: the convention organizers also invited anyone from the future with the ability to travel back into the past to take part in the discussion. We are told:

> A roped-off area...will create a landing pad so materializing time-travel machines will not crash into trees or dormitories.

The convention's organizers reasoned, logically, that if at some point in the future time travel became a possibility, then someone from the 30th, or 300th, century could visit the discussion in order to confirm that these computer geeks were not theorizing in vain. Said Mr. Dorai:

> "I would hope they would come with the idea of showing us that time travel is possible..."

How, the article asked, would those in the future find out about the conference that had already taken place, so that they could visit it in the past? Dorai came up with a way to invite those born centuries in the future:

> "Write the details down on a piece of acid-free paper," he directed, "and slip them into obscure books in academic libraries!"

Dorai apparently understood that the odds of arrivals from the future were slim, but, he told the *Times*:

> "If you can just give up a Saturday night, there's a very small chance at it being the biggest event in human history."

It is an amusing article, but interestingly, Mr. Dorai assumed that time travel would be invented centuries in the future. But what if time travel actually originated in the past, long ago, with the composition of the Torah? What if time travel lies at the heart of the Jewish calendar, and of the Jewish conception of time itself?

Leviticus 23 introduces the various "*mo'adim*," "appointed times," of Judaism. The chapter begins with a seeming redundancy:

> *Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, The appointed times of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my appointed times.*
>
> *Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, a holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings.* (Leviticus 23:2-3)

Then, after this reference to the Sabbath, suddenly the Bible seems to repeat itself by introducing the entire concept of sacred time again:

> *These are the appointed times of the Lord, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons.*
>
> *In the fourteenth day of the first month at evening is the Lord's pesach.*
>
> *And on the fifteenth day of the same month is*

> *the feast of unleavened bread unto the Lord: seven days ye must eat unleavened bread.* (Leviticus 23:4-6)

The rest of the chapter focuses on the holidays, rather than the Sabbath.

What is occurring here is the distinguishing between two types of sacred moments: Sabbath and the festivals. Both involve the sanctification of time, but they express different ideas, as well as contrasting cosmic phenomena. The Sabbath existed long before the nation of Israel came into being. It was sanctified by God Himself at the conclusion of creation, and is an eternal commemoration of creation. Its sanctity suffuses the world every seventh day with the setting of the sun.

Meanwhile, the dates of the holidays are connected to the biblical lunar calendar, which follows the waxing and waning of the moon. Lunar cycles are around 29 and a half days, thus, the holidays that occur in the middle of the Jewish month, such as Pesach or Sukkot, occur around the same time as a full moon. The Jewish observance of two separate kinds of sacred time represents the distinct, but intertwining, aspects of Jewish existence. At least one central theme of the Sabbath—creation—is universal, whereas what the holidays mark is covenantal. Jews have always considered themselves apart from, but also a part of, the rest of the world. The Jewish people are chosen, but our chosenness is linked to our connection with, and our monotheistic message to, humanity. Thus, the Sabbath speaks to our universal mission, while the holidays—and the lunar Jewish calendar—speak to our covenantal state. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once put it, the Sabbath is the signature of our *human* existence and the new moon the symbol of our particular *Jewish* calling.

Whereas the Sabbath's fundamental focus on creation lends a universal dimension to the biblical focus of the day, the profound particularity of the holidays is linked to two themes: moments in Jewish history and the Land of Israel. The holidays are specifically scheduled around moments in the agricultural cycle of the Holy Land. Thus Pesach, what is often called Passover, coincides with the ripening of the barley harvest and the onset of spring. Its celebration is therefore followed immediately with the offering of the new crop of barley. Only then is the new grain permitted to Israelites:

> *And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched grain, nor green ears, until that day that ye bring this offering unto your God...* (Leviticus 23:14)

Fifty days later we arrive at Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, coinciding with the onset of the wheat harvest. Thus a ritual centering on loaves of wheat flour takes place in the Temple. Verse 17:

> *Ye shall bring from your habitations two loaves of sifted fine flour as an uplifted offering of two tenths of measure...* (Leviticus 23:17)

Then, some months later, Sukkot, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, takes place. It is a sort of thanksgiving as the harvest concludes and all Israel rejoices in the Temple with the symbols of Israelite agriculture:

> *And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.* (Leviticus 23:40)

Through these offerings and rituals, at every moment in the cycle, Israel is reminded to see God, rather than the false nature gods of surrounding societies, as the true source of their sustenance. But the Bible's concern is not only preventing paganism, but also undercutting Israelite arrogance. Lest the farmer glory in what he has produced, Israel at these very times is instructed to mark the central moments of its history. In the spring, the Exodus is recalled; the Feast of Weeks coincides with the anniversary of the Sinai revelation; and at the end of the harvest, when the farmer is most likely to credit himself for his achievement, he is obligated to recall in the Feast of Booths the sojourn in the desert, and thereby to realize that all comes from God's grace.

But what is occurring here is much more than commemoration or recollection. Let us, for example, take Sukkot, the holiday of the harvest. Its observance

is, at least superficially, striking and strange. After all, the abundance of the harvest, one might think, should be marked in comfort, with the bounty of the fields adorning one's home. Instead, Israel is called to celebrate the harvest, the bounty bestowed by heaven, in a ramshackle structure: a *sukkah*, or booth. A *sukkah*, a fragile structure that offers almost no shelter at all, would seem to bespeak not the abundant harvest, but homelessness.

If Sukkot seems counterintuitive, it is because what the Bible asks of us at this moment is to take ourselves out of our time and re-enact and re-experience something else entirely: to see ourselves with Israel wandering in the desert after the Exodus, without any permanent homes for shelter:

> *Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths:*
>
> *That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.* (Leviticus 23:42-43)

What is taking place here is not only remembering, but re-enacting, re-experiencing, re-living. The ancient Israelite who has known nothing but his farm is suddenly transported to another time, when Israel looked directly to the Almighty for food, to Providence in the desert for protection. This is a form of spiritual time travel. It is an Israelite invention. Mr. Dorai, the organizer of the MIT conference, reflected to the media why he remained hopeful for a visitor from the future. He said:

> Isn't time travel impossible? We can't know for certain. The ancient Greeks would have thought computers were impossible, and the Phoenicians certainly wouldn't have believed that humans would one day send a spacecraft to the Moon and back. We cannot predict the future of science or technology, so we can only make an effort and see if any time travelers come to our convention.

Dorai is in a certain sense correct. The civilizations of the ancient age could not have conceived of our technological advancements, but maybe there was one people that had actually invented a form of time travel thousands of years ago. The Torah speaks of the powerful covenantal between Jews that transcends time, that breaks the barriers between past and present, that is *transgenerational*.

In eating unleavened bread for seven days, we are transported back to Egypt and the Exodus; in leaving our homes and sitting in *sukkot*, we are suddenly in the wilderness with Moses. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik put it:

> The *masorah*, the process of transmission, symbolizes the Jewish people's outlook regarding the beautiful and resplendent phenomenon of time. The chain of tradition, begun millennia ago, will continue until the end of all time. Time, in this conception, is not destructive, all-consuming, and does not simply consist of fleeting, imperceptible moments. The Jew walks alongside Maimonides, listens to Rabbi Akiva.

This is what it means to be a Jew; or as Rabbi Soloveitchik further wrotet:

> Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever present realities.

The prominent physicist Paul Davies, author of the book *How to Build a Time Machine*, notes that one of the best arguments *against* time travel is the absolute lack of our noticing of what he calls "time tourists," people returning from the future to re-experience moments in history. But to observe the Jewish calendar, to recall the redemptive acts of God, and to teach them to our children, is to constantly travel to and tour the formative moments of Israel's story.

This is biblical sacred time. The holidays are ideally intended for the Holy Land and the cycle of its seasons. But with the exile, with the destruction of Israelite agriculture, a new form of time travel took place. A

holiday such as Sukkot was originally intended to transport an ancient Israelite back in time; but let us consider someone celebrating Sukkot in Detroit, or my own hometown of Chicago, where it is not the end of the harvest, and where the weather is more akin to an arctic tundra than to a Middle Eastern autumn. For Jews such as these, as well as for Jews all around the world, to celebrate Sukkot, to experience the unity of time, is also to transport themselves back to the age of the Temple, to the observance of Sukkot in Jerusalem. That is why the exile could never undo the memory of all that they once had.

This point was made by Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Tancred*, who, in a fetching passage, describes the Israelite observance of Sukkot. He asks us to picture, as he writes:

> ...the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine!

Picture to yourself, Disraeli is asking us, a Jew in Northern England or somewhere else in Europe, who recalls an ancient harvest festival that took place in the Holy Land long ago. Disraeli further describes an English Jew making the holiday:

> He rises in the morning, goes early to some White-chapel market, purchases some willow boughs for which he has previously given a commission, and which are brought, probably, from one of the neighbouring rivers of Essex, hastens home, cleans out the yard of his miserable tenement, builds his bower, decks it, even profusely, with the finest flowers and fruits that he can procure, the myrtle and the citron never forgotten, and hangs its roof with variegated lamps. After the service of his synagogue, he sups late with his wife and his children in the open air, as if he were in the pleasant villages of Galilee, beneath its sweet and starry sky.

Disraeli concludes by arguing to his readers that a people that in this manner refuses to forget the vintage of the Holy Land will one day regain it. And so it was.

In reading about the time travel conference, I noticed an interesting instruction given for those leaving invitations to future time travelers. It was this:

> Time travel is a hard problem, and it may not be invented until long after MIT has faded into oblivion. Thus, we ask that you include the latitude/longitude information when you publicize the convention.

Long after the ancient glory of Jerusalem had crumbled into dust, Jews were able to locate the sacred city; to keep it, and the land, alive in their hearts, so that they would one day return, and experience an ancient birthright restored.

After the scheduled date for the conference, I checked out the convention website to see what had happened. Mr. Dorai could not hide his disappointment. He admitted, “The convention was a mixed success. Unfortunately, we had no confirmed time travelers visit us.” However, he does hold out the hope that perhaps, “many time travelers could have attended incognito to avoid endless questions about the future.”

Well, I would suggest that time travel is an established fact, only it is to be found not in physics, but in faith. The proof of its power can be found in a land revived, an Israelite populace restored; part of the future foreseen by the Bible is now part of the present. Or if you will, the Jewish ability to visit its ever-living past has brought it back to the future.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik discusses how the focus of the Sabbath is to some extent universal, while the focus of the Jewish holidays is national and particularistic. What can this balance teach us about navigating life as a Jew in the nations of the Diaspora? What can it teach us about how the State of Israel should navigate its role in the family of nations?

2. The festivals of the Bible, Rabbi Soloveichik explains, prompt us not only to remember the past, but to re-experience it. Do post-biblical and rabbinic holidays—like Hanukkah, Purim, or even Israel's Independence Day—do the same thing? How?

This pamphlet may contain Divrei Torah and may contain Sheimot - Please dispose of accordingly