

Echoes of Eden

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An Extension of Holiness

Centuries ago, a major argument shook the Jewish world. The argument centered around the omer offering, specifically regarding the interpretation of the Torah passage commanding that the omer ceremony be performed “after the Shabbat.” In context, the word Shabbat clearly refers to the Passover holiday, which is also a sabbatical day – a day of rest on which no labor is performed. Additionally, in an adjacent passage, both the first of Tishrei and the tenth of Tishrei are referred to as Shabbat. It is simply not possible that both of these dates would be Saturdays, being that there are only seven days in a week. Thus we must conclude, as did the mainstream rabbinic establishment of that time, that the term “Shabbat” means a day of rest, and not necessarily or exclusively “the Sabbath” in the classic sense of ‘the seventh day of the week’ (Saturday).

Unassailable as this logic may seem, during the Second Temple period there was nonetheless a group of Jews who insisted that the ceremony of the omer must always be performed literally “after Shabbat” - on a Saturday night. This group who fought the rabbis was known as the Boethusians.

At first glance the Boethusians seem to have espoused a more stringent form of religious adherence, particularly regarding Sabbath observance. In claiming that the omer must always be brought on a Saturday night, they ensured that this ritual, which involved harvesting grain, would never be performed on the Sabbath itself. On the other hand, mainstream rabbinic opinion allowed for the omer to be harvested and offered on whatever day of the week immediately followed the first day of Passover - hence, the omer ceremony would occasionally fall on the Sabbath. Despite the fact that this ceremony included going out to the field and harvesting some of the newly-grown barley, which would normally be labor that is prohibited on Shabbat, the rabbis felt that in the case of the omer offering – as in the case of all offerings brought in the Temple – the normal rules of Shabbat were held in abeyance. The Boethusians disagreed; in fact, their dissent was so strong that they went so far as to dispatch false witnesses to testify that they had seen the new moon in order to manipulate the calendar to jibe with their opinion.

The Boethusians' seemingly conservative approach to the sanctity of Shabbat actually masked a deeper issue: In their view, the Boethusians confined the concept of holiness to the Temple compound, while the rabbis' concept of kedusha extended to the most basic activities of everyday life. The rabbis believed that on occasion, even the fields, even the manual labor of harvesting barley, are holy. The rules that apply to the Temple and its exalted rites of sacrifice also pay a visit to the familiar agricultural milieu, creating kedusha that is so lofty as to supersede even the laws of Shabbat.

This distinction between the two opinions regarding the omer is no mere argument over minutiae of law; it reveals a vast chasm dividing two very different religious philosophies. Rabbinic Judaism regards the essence of Jewish life in the Land of Israel as an agricultural enterprise designed to bring holiness

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into every aspect of life. The field is not only a place of labor, it is a place of charity and social justice, where the poor are to be fed, the weak and disenfranchised cared for. Indeed, the overarching structure of Jewish agricultural life was orchestrated by Divine law to create a just and holy society. In this light, it makes perfect sense that the evening after we sit with our families and discuss the Passover experience and what it was like to be slaves, we go out to the fields and publicly exhibit that this work is holy, and holiness is not relegated exclusively to the Temple but permeates all aspects of our lives.

On the other hand, the Boethusians, who were kohanim (priests), were hesitant to "share" the holiness of the Temple. In fact, their theological divergence from the mainstream was far deeper than a Temple-centric view of Judaism, or even the lengths to which they were willing to go to protect the Temple's exclusivity. In an attempt to clarify their philosophy, one of the leading sages of that era, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, engaged the Boethusians in debate, and questioned their untenable reading of the verses regarding the omer offering. One of the elders of the Boethusians gave this explanation: "It is well known that Moshe loved the Jews, and therefore he wished for the Pentecost holiday, which follows the omer ceremony by precisely seven weeks, to always fall on a

Sunday (which would only be assured if performed on a Saturday night) - thereby creating a 'long weekend'."

The Boethusians' argument brings several aspects of their philosophy into focus: First, it was convenience, and not holiness, which motivated the Boethusians. They were less interested in the holiness - of the Temple or the fields - than in a long weekend. Moreover, we may discern a subtle admission in the subtext of their argument: It was Moshe, and not God, who had devised the commandments. They did not consider the Torah to be Divine; rather, Moshe had "made things up" based on considerations of vacation, travel, convenience - and not holiness.

In short, these corrupt priests did not truly believe in holiness - not of the fields, not of the Torah's commandments, not even of the Temple in which they served. The rabbis, on the other hand, believed that the holiness of the Temple also existed in the fields. While the Boethusians fought to protect their own turf, the rabbis attempted to enable all of society to feel the holiness of the Temple - even out in the fields. This, they taught, was the Will of God: to create a holy society.

For a more in depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/04/audio-and-essays-parashat-emor.html>