

Emor 5781 - The Mitzvot of Returning

We are moving back - gradually - into reopening. And we have been noticing over the past weeks that the Torah has models for this process.

The obvious one that springs to mind is the Exodus - the journey from slavery to freedom, from narrowness and constraint to breadth and growth.

Just before the Exodus itself takes place, the Torah describes it in an unusual way. It's a 'leil shimurim' - a night of watching, in which we imagine the Israelites awake, waiting for the moment to be told they were leaving. But I think it's Rashi who describes it as a night of waiting not for the people, but for the Holy One, who has held their breath - as it were - for four hundred and something years in anticipation of this moment.

The 19th century German rabbi Moshe Sofer (known as the Hatam Sofer) picks up a similar use of the word 'ushmartem' in today's parashah:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם מִצְוֹתַי וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם אֲנִי ה' (לא)
 וְלֹא תַחֲלֹלוּ אֶת שֵׁם קֹדְשִׁי וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם (לב)

“You shall faithfully observe My commandments: I am YHVH. You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I YHVH who sanctify you” (Lev. 22:31-32)

The verb “shall faithfully observe (ושמרתם/ushemartem)” has a quality of meaning similar to the phrase “his father watched to see what would unfold (ואביב שמר את הדבר/ve'aviv shamar et hadavar)” (Gen. 37:11). That is, you should wait and watch, looking forward to the moment when you will be able to fulfill mitzvot.

This is the first week for over a year that we have been able to have more than 36 people in this space. Our children's services are running again. We have takeout treats (if not quite Kiddush lunch just yet!) and a space for social conversation for a little while. We welcome Barry back to the Bimah. We have a run of simchas coming up. The Exodus is happening...gradually.

So what are the mitzvot we have been waiting to perform? What are the mitzvot of returning to community after a long period of absence? Let me suggest just three.

The first is the mitzvah of coming together again. It's been a while! And not all of us are in the same place when it comes to sharing space, whether inside or outdoors. Some of us can't wait to rip off our masks and hug. Others are more cautious. Still others aren't yet ready to come back into the space just yet and are waiting to see how others find it. So our first mitzvah is one of remembering - remembering just how much we have missed our relationships and how important they are to us, even if we are not at the same stage or hold the same opinions.

The second is to celebrate! It's hard to identify milestones when a process is gradual. Opening the shul isn't like opening a theater. But perhaps that gives us *more* moments to mark and to celebrate, more places to express the joy we feel in seeing each other again. Two weeks ago, when we read about healing, we noticed the way that each moment of that journey can be precious.

And the third is to bring with us what we've learned. A year is a long time. We've acquired skills we didn't have before. Maybe we think more about others. Maybe we have developed the habit of reaching out more often. Maybe we multi-task more effectively. Maybe we are better bakers. Certainly we're a bit more technologically proficient. What will happen when we channel all of that creativity, that adaptability, that out-of-the-box thinking, back into our communities?

One thing's for certain. Hopefully it won't need a 400-plus year wait and then 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to get these mitzvot done. *Ken yehi ratzon!*

Shabbat shalom.