

Parashat Pinhas

Numbers 25:10–30:1

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When I attended junior congregation as a child, one of my favorite Shabbat morning songs began with the words *uv'yom haShabbat*. We kids used to belt it out. I remember the same thing happening when I spent summers as a camper at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. But why sing today about slaughtering and offering up lambs on the altar in the Temple? An answer can be found in this week's Parashat Pinhas, where these words, or rather these verses, originate.

Parashat Pinhas recounts the end of the episode involving Pinhas the Priest, the findings of a second census, the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, and the selection of Joshua by Moses as his successor. It also provides a detailed list of the holy days and their animal offerings. Although for the rest of the holy days the Torah prescribes an extensive array of bulls, rams, lambs, and goats, it stipulates for Shabbat, strangely enough, only two additional lambs over and above the daily morning and evening sacrifices. So the simple answer to the question above is that the rabbis saw fit to remind us, on each of our holy days, of the prescribed Temple offerings for that day. Reciting these verses allows us to "say" and also study the sacrifices, which is equivalent to offering them, in the rabbinic scheme of things.

An even more appealing reason for reciting these verses in the Shabbat Musaf prayer can be found in the Friday-night kiddush. When we recite the kiddush over wine each week, we rarely think about what the familiar words mean. It is standard practice for everyone at the Shabbat table to join the leader when he or she reaches the phrase *kee hu yom tehilah*, but the key messages of this sanctification paragraph begin even earlier. The passage opens by saying that God favored us (*ratzah banu*) by giving us, in perpetuity, His holy Sabbath. Three expressions immediately follow that define the essence of the Sabbath. They are:

- 1) *zikaron lema'aseh bereishit*, a reminder of the works of creation
- 2) *kee hu yom tehilah lemiqra'ei kodesh*, the first of the holy convocations
- 3) *zekher li'yetziat Mitzrayim*, a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt

The paragraph draws to a close by repeating, nearly verbatim, the notion of Shabbat as a gift from God, and ends with the words "Blessed are you God who sanctifies the Sabbath."

The first and third expressions derive from the Ten Commandments: the version in Exodus 20 talks about the Sabbath as a reminder that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh and blessed it.

We are expected to do the same. The version in Deuteronomy 5 says that the Sabbath commemorates God taking us out of Egypt, the land of our bondage, with a strong hand. We should therefore make sure that our entire household, in particular our servants, rests just the way we do. These are deep theological and sociological messages.

However, what is the second phrase saying about the Sabbath? As we read in this week's parashah, in Numbers 28, these words are proclaiming that the Sabbath appears first on the list of holidays. It is true that the daily offerings are mentioned even before the Sabbath, but they are not viewed as holy day offerings. When the Torah moves on to list the offerings for special days, Shabbat heads the list. Rosh Hodesh follows, then Passover, then the Day of First Fruits (Shavu'ot), and so on. So the rabbis who authored the words *kee hu yom tehilah* are saying that even though the holidays are more colorful than Shabbat—marked, for instance, by matzah on Passover, first fruits on Shavu'ot, a sukkah on Sukkot—and even though the Torah prescribes many more animal offerings on those days than on Shabbat, Shabbat still trumps all the others. The rabbis of the Talmud decided that we may not wave the lulav, blow the shofar, or fast on Shabbat (Yom Kippur is an exception to this rule). They determined that seven people read the Torah portion on Shabbat, compared with six or fewer on all other holy days. My guess is that those who composed the kiddush made the words *kee hu yom tehilah* its central point because back then, like today, people found it much easier and more inviting to observe the joyous holidays than the solemn, restriction-laden Sabbath. The rabbis called Passover, in its kiddush, the "time of our liberation," and Sukkot, in its kiddush, "the season of our rejoicing." Only kiddush for Shabbat claims it is "the first of the holy days."

I can now justify singing even today the lilting song about the Sabbath sacrifices. Rather than pay attention to its literal meaning—of offering animals on the altar—we should remember where the words of the song appear in the Torah: in Parashat Pinhas, first on the list of the holidays. The message is that the Sabbath, with its exhortation to desist from work and pursue social justice for all human beings, is the most important and meaningful of all holy convocations. Of this we can surely sing.

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