

The Bleeding Heart

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Parshat Emor

The third of the four chapters of Parshat Emor commands us once again to refrain from work on Shabbat and the Festivals. A section is allotted to Shabbat and then to each of the Festivals, in calendar order, beginning with Pesah. The chapter takes up forty-four verses.

Yes, yes; ho-hum. Are we now about to undertake a statistical analysis of the Torah reading? If so, then so what?

Well, not exactly. But there is a statistic that is interesting and that teaches us a lesson. The chapter is forty-four verses long, and verse twenty-two, the middle verse of the chapter, speaks not explicitly to the Festivals and Holy Days but rather commands us that we may not harvest the “corners” of our field nor pick up stalks that might have fallen to the ground as we reap, for these are to be left for those who are in need of them. And the verse concludes with the oft-repeated Torahitic formula, **I-AM is your Eternal G*d.**

Because this Commandment occupies the middle verse, the verse precisely in the middle of the discussion of Shabbat and the Festivals, we understand it to be at the heart of the Holy Days, the days which G*d has claimed as “My Special Times.”

Precisely in the middle of the Laws of the Holy Days, we are commanded to take care of those who are less fortunate than ourselves. The Command itself is

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nothing new; it echoes instructions that were given us in Leviticus 19:9. But the traditional understanding is that there is nothing superfluous in the Torah, and so we must seek an explanation of its repetition here. It is not just to command us; that has already been done. When we look to its context, we realize that Shabbat and the Festivals – as the Prophets never tire of reminding us – become meaningful only if we combine their observance with taking care of those in need. Here they are personified as “the poor and the stranger,” but we understand the expression to include implicitly all those who are in need.

The center, then – the essence – of Shabbat and Festivals is not the ritual observance, not the refraining from work, not the Kiddush, the candle-lighting, the festive meals, the Seder, the dwelling in the Sukkah, the fasting. Important as those observances are – and the Festivals and Shabbat are not Festivals and Shabbat without them – the heart of the Holy Days is the Command which stands at the heart of this chapter, the Commandment to take care of those who are in need.

Maimonides writes concerning Purim, the celebration of wild joy, that there can be no greater expression of joy than bringing joy to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. One who brings joy to the joyless he likens to Sh'khinah. Not to “one who welcomes Sh'khinah,” but to Sh'khinah Herself!

How great it is to see to the needs of the needy! It is the heart of our Festivals, the heart of Shabbat, the heart of all Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom.