**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**The Four Special Sabbaths**

In the weeks before and after Purim, there are four Special Sabbaths on the liturgical calendar (Tosefta Megillah 1:1-4).  On the Sabbath coinciding with or preceding Rosh Chodesh Adar, we read Parshat Shekalim (Eodus 30:11-16).  On the Sabbath before Purim, we read Parshat Zakhor (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).  On the Sabbath after Purim, we read Parshat Parah (Numbers 19:1-22).  On the Sabbath coinciding with or preceding Rosh Chodesh Nisan, we read Parshat Ha-Chodesh (Exodus 12:1-20).  Collectively, these special readings are known as the “Arba Parshiyyot.”

The purposes of these additional Torah readings seem clear, according to traditional explanations: In antiquity, adult male Jews annually contributed a half-shekel coin to fund the Temple cult.  The Temple’s fiscal year began in Nisan.  The half-shekel ideally was remitted in the month of Adar so that the coins could arrive at the Temple and be deposited in the sacred coffers in time for the incoming year’s first appropriation of funds.  The public reading in the synagogue of Parshat Shekalim, approximately one month before the deadline, was one method of alerting Jews to their upcoming financial-religious responsibility.  Parshat Zakhor is the annual fulfillment of our obligation to remember the evil deeds of the Amalekites.  It is appropriate to observe this in Adar (in close proximity to Purim), since the villain of the Purim story, Haman, is a descendant of Amalek.  Parshat Parah served as a reminder to the public that anyone afflicted with corpse impurity could not properly enter the Temple precincts without first undergoing a purification ritual involving the ashes of a red heifer.  Throngs of Jews ascended to Jerusalem annually to observe the Paschal rites.  The synagogue reading of Numbers 19 several weeks in advance of the holiday gave people ample time to make any needed adjustments to their ritual status.  In Parshat Ha-Chodesh, Scripture sets forth the laws concerning the Paschal Lamb and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.  These laws are complex and highly demanding.  A public study session two weeks before the holiday served to educate the Jewish masses and improve compliance with halakhah.

And yet there is something unsatisfactory about these standard explanations.  Many Biblical commandments, notably those observed during the autumn holidays, are seasonal.  Popular observance of such commandments could be strengthened by educational sessions – including specifically special Torah readings – in advance of those holidays.  Yet no such synagogue ceremonies exist outside of the four observed in late winter and early spring.

In an article published in Jewish Quarterly Review in 1893, Adolf Buchler postulated that the Four Special Sabbaths served to complete the third year of the triennial cycle of Torah readings.  According to his theory, the synagogue Torah service began with Genesis 1:1 in Nisan of year one and concluded with Deuteronomy 34 and the death of Moses on 7 Adar of year three.  The remaining few Sabbaths conveniently were occasions to read Shekalim, Zakhor, Parah, and Ha-Chodesh.  Buchler’s theory is highly speculative and has many infirmities.   It did, however, hint at another explanation.  That hint has served as a springboard for my reaching my own, independent conclusions about the issue.

Let us first consider in some detail the historical development of the synagogue Torah service.

The Mishnah teaches that the regular cycle of readings is interrupted for the Four Special Sabbaths (Mishnah Megillah 3:4).  The Talmud, however, notes an ambiguity in the Tannaitic teaching.  What, precisely, is interrupted – a) the cycle of Torah readings or b) the cycle of prophetic readings (the Haphtaroth) (Megillah 30b)?  Rabbi Ami thought it was the first; Rabbi Jeremiah thought it was the second.  A careful reading of the Mishnah supports Rabbi Ami’s position:  “We pause for all including Rosh Chodesh, Hanukah, Purim, fasts, ma’amadoth, and Yom Kippur.”  Key is that some of those days have no Haphtarah.  Accordingly, the meaning of the Mishnah must be that the Torah readings for special occasions take priority over and displace the regular cycle of Torah readings, even on the Sabbath (Rashi).

Contemporary practice, however, follows, instead, Rabbi Jeremiah.  The regular Parshat Ha-Shavua is read on the Four Special Sabbaths.  Only the Maftir and Haftarah depart from the annual cycle.  For example, this coming Saturday, when we observe Parshat Zakhor, instead of repeating Leviticus 5:24-26 as the Maftir and reading Isaiah 43:21-44:23 as the Haftarah, we will take out a second Torah scroll and read Deuteronomy 25:17-19 followed by a Haftarah taken from

I Samuel 15:1-34.

Anyone familiar with the regulations pertaining to the public Torah reading might be tempted to inquire how Rabbi Ami could even have contemplated that specialty readings could displace the weekly portion.  The minimum number of verses chanted by each Aliyah recipient is three (Megillah 22a).  The minimum number of total verses for any public reading is ten (Megillah 21b).  On the Sabbath, seven people must be called for an Aliyah (Mishnah Megillah 4:2).  Arithmetic dictates that on the Sabbath at least 21 verses must be read aloud.  The Four Special reading contain only 6, 3, 22, and 20 verses, respectively.  Thus, each of Shekalim, Zakhor, and Ha-Chodesh fails to pass the 21-verse minimum threshold.

However, the existence of this problem, by itself, does not compel us to reject Rabbi Ami’s position.  The rules governing the synagogue Torah reading evolved over the course of centuries.  Mishnah Megillah 3:4 proves that instituting the practice of reading the Arba Parshiyyot predated the formulation of the rules about the number of Aliyot and verses.  After those rules were set down, it then became necessary to change the status of each of the four special readings from that of  a) the day’s exclusive Scriptural selection to b) a mere Maftir addendum.

The Arba Parshiyyot likely predate the institution of the practice of regular public Sabbath Torah readings.  According to tradition, the earliest stage in the development of the public Torah reading occurred when Moses ordained that, on festivals, holiday-related matters be expounded upon (Sifra Numbers 15).  In the Pentateuch, it is stated that the Hak-hel ceremony must take place on Sukkot (Deuteronomy 31:11).  The earliest public Torah readings on record occurred in the days of Ezra, on Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot (Nehemiah 8:8, 8:18).  Likely, the Four Special Sabbaths, with their thematic connections to the holidays, were born at a time when the synagogue reading was still a rarity and was closely associated with festivals.

*When* did this happen?  If we treat the four readings as an indivisible unit, it is possible to identify a *terminus post quem*.

In antiquity, foreign overlords funded the Temple cult in Jerusalem.  Early in the Second Temple period, the Aechemenid monarchs of Persia paid for the Jewish sacrificial service.  Later, the Hellenistic kings of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires funded Jewish worship.  During the Hasmonean period, either during the reign of John Hyrcanus or Alexander Jannaeus, a Jewish poll tax was promulgated.  Adult male Jews were required to give a Tyrian half-shekel to the Temple.  The tax was in some ways modeled on the remittance commanded in Exodus 30.  But that earlier command was a one-time remittance to fund part of the Tabernacle’s construction.  It was not an annual obligation; it did not pay for the cost of communal sacrifices.  The Hasmonean poll tax was a dramatic increase (a quadrupling) over Nehemiah’s one-third shekel tax imposed 300 years earlier (Nehemiah 10:32).  Adjusting for changes in denomination and currency, the tax, in terms of grams of silver, went from 1.8 to 7.2.

Some Jews, especially among the priestly class, objected to the half-shekel tax (Mishnah Shekalim 1:4).  Rabbinic literature records a dispute between the Pharisees and the Boethusians about whether a private individual could donate a communal sacrifice.  The elitist Boethusians permitted the practice, while the more egalitarian Pharisees insisted that the community as a whole, by means of the half-shekel payments, fund the daily communal offerings.  The sectarian dispute was primarily sociological, though each side could point to a different interpretation of Numbers 28:2-4.  Upon winning the argument, the Pharisees instituted a minor holiday for 1-8 Nisan, during which fasting and eulogizing were forbidden (Megillat Ta’anit).  The Pharisaic victory can be dated roughly to the early 70s BCE, when the Pharisees took control of the government upon the demise of Jannaeus and the ascendancy of Salome Alexandra.

The public reading of Parshat Shekalim was an effective way of reinforcing a first-century BCE sectarian religious victory.  If indeed all the Arba Parshiyyot share a similar history, we should be able to find late Second Temple era controversies associated with Zakhor, Parah, and Ha-Chodesh.

Purim was originally an eastern Diaspora holiday.  It spread slowly westward while encountering vigorous opposition within the Jewish community on both theological and political-strategic grounds.  Purim was either unknown or still unaccepted by normative Eretz Israel Jewry as late as the early second century BCE.  Ben Sira, in his list of Jewish heroes, skips from Zerubbabel and Nehemiah to Simon the Righteous; he does not mention either Mordecai or Esther (Ecclesiasticus 49-50).  In I Maccabees, written in Eretz Yisrael during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, there is no reference to the fact that Yom Nikanor occurs one day before Purim.  In contrast, II Maccabees, written approximately at the same time in the Diaspora, identifies Yom Nikanor as occurring “on the eve of Mordecai’s day” (II Maccabees 15:36).  The Apocryphal Additions to Esther begin with a note that the Greek version of Esther was brought to Egypt from Jerusalem in the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra (11:1).  Elias Bickerman identified this royal couple as Ptolemy XII Auletes and Cleopatra V, with their fourth year being 78-77 BCE.  It is reasonable to assume that Purim and the Book of Esther were widely, though not universally, accepted in the Holy Land by that time.  The reading of Parshat Zakhor may have been enacted in the 70s BCE to reinforce the viewpoint that Megillat Esther is canonical and that Purim is worthy of being observed by pious Jews.  The timing of this liturgical innovation would correspond neatly with what we know about Parshat Shekalim.  [Another theory suggested by Buchler was that Zakhor was instituted as a protest against Hellenism; Ismar Elbogen dismissed this view as having no historical foundation.]

The mysterious red heifer ceremony was also the subject of sectarian controversy.  The Pharisees subscribed to the concept of טבול יום, literally meaning “one who has bathed that day.”  Scripture sets forth the rule that a ritually unclean person remains unclean, even after immersion, until nightfall (Leviticus 22:6).  According to the Pharisees, the status of the person between immersion and nightfall is one of reduced impurity and with diminished ability to transmit impurity by direct contact with foodstuffs.  The Sadducees rejected the notion of טבול יום outright, and considered a person completely impure until nightfall.  To demonstrate the correctness of their viewpoint, the Pharisees would intentionally render impure the priest set to burn the red heifer’s carcass.  This action was totally unnecessary other than to irritate the Sadducees, who would be offended at what they considered a breach of cultic law (Mishnah Parah 3:7).  The Pharisees chose to make their stand at the red heifer burning because of the gravity and significance of the event.  Improper performance of the ritual would make it impossible for Jews to escape corpse impurity.  The Pharisees were, therefore, displaying their absolute conviction about the matter.  The synagogue reading of Parshat Parah, together with its proto-rabbinic exposition, would reinforce the “correct” position in an ongoing controversy.

[Another possible reason why the proto-rabbis introduced Parshat Parah involves the Pharisaic leniency that Amei Ha-Aretz do not ritually contaminate anything they touch while they are on festival pilgrimage (Niddah 34a).  The premise of this leniency is that, though the unlettered masses generally do not abide by ritual purity laws, on the holidays when they go God’s holy city, they are extra-careful to purify themselves.  Realistically, that assumption was unwarranted.  But a public reading of Numbers 19 several weeks in advance of the holiday makes this charitable assessment of popular behavior somewhat more plausible.]

Parshat Ha-Chodesh is the most challenging of the Four Special readings to fit into my theory of liturgical reaction to sectarian controversy.  The basic explanation for reading Ha-Chodesh -- educating the synagogue-going masses about their upcoming Paschal obligations -- is reasonable enough.  Yet, even in this case, it is possible to connect the special reading to a famous dispute.  The Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about the correct interpretation of the phrase “the morrow of the Sabbath” (Leviticus 23:15).  The Pharisees understand Sabbath to mean the Yom Tov of the first day of Passover.  Accordingly, the Omer was offered on any day of the week and Shavuot could fall out on any day of the week.  The Sadducees understood Sabbath to mean Saturday.  Accordingly, the Omer sacrifice and Shavuot must fall out on Sunday.  During the brief periods in the late Second Temple period when the Pharisees controlled the cult, the only way for the Boethusians or Sadducees to ensure that the Omer and Shavuot would be observed properly (per their view) was to arrange for Rosh Chodesh Nisan to be declared on a Saturday.  The Talmud records an incident in which the Boethusians hired false witnesses on Friday, 29 Adar, to testify in court the next day about having seen the new moon, thereby rendering Saturday, 30 Adar, into Saturday, 1 Nisan (Rosh HaShanah 22b, per Rashi’s commentary).  A double agent foiled the plot.  The sages reacted by decreeing that only known reliable witnesses would be accepted thenceforward (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:1).  It is possible that Parshat Ha-Chodesh, and the desire to identify clearly the beginning of Nisan, has its origins in this episode.

For many Jews, and especially for rabbis who deliver sermons thereon, the Four Special Sabbaths are a welcome escape from the comparatively uninspiring latter portions of Exodus and early portions of Leviticus.  More importantly, the Special Sabbaths afford us an opportunity to reflect on lost religious institutions and the role played by liturgy in first shaping, and then continuing to affirm, the practices that constitute normative Judaism.