

## Creating Sacred Space and Time

A few months ago, I participated in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality's annual rabbinic retreat in Southern California.



Since this was before my illness, I was still running quite a bit and planned a long run through some of the hills, canyons and mountains of Simi Valley.

It was a perfect Californian afternoon in the mid 70s and I felt that I could fly up and down the hills. After a few miles, I found myself on a scenic overlook which enjoyed a commanding view of the valley. I had to stop and take it in. As I paused, two hikers walked by.

These two women seemed to be appreciating the surroundings, and I thought they were taking out their smartphones to take a picture of the vista.

But, as I watched them, I realized that they were just texting. In the midst of all this beauty and wonder, their eyes were glued to their screens. And here's the thing – as I looked more carefully, I realized that they were

actually texting each other. Standing in this sacred space, they were speaking through their phones.

\* \* \*

This *parashah* is all about creating sacred space. *Parashat Emor* delineates numerous rules for the *kohanim*. But what was the purpose of all these rules? Why have *kohanim*, spiritual leaders performing rituals in the holy places like the *Mishkan*, the Desert Sanctuary, or later on in the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem? *A la* the wicked son at the *seder*, what's the point of all this?

Well, these *kohanim* were transforming space so that they and



all those present could feel God's presence, so they could come close to the Ineffable.

The *kohanim* and their rites made space *kadosh* – holy, sacred. And that sanctity, that *kedushah*, brought the Children of Israel closer to sensing the divine.

Sometimes, that happens in the Sinai Desert, sometimes in Jerusalem, sometimes in Simi Valley and, sometimes, right here in Lexington.

The laws may need some revisions, but their core purpose is clear – to bring us close to God, to being present to the Mystery and Meaning that lies at the center of the universe.



\* \* \*

But suddenly in the second half of the *parashah*, the Torah veers

Tishri 5777						
Yom Rishon	Yom Sheni	Yom Shlishi	Yom Riv'i	Yom Chamishi	Yom Shishi	Shabbat
	1 Rosh HaShanah	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10 Yom Kippur	11	12	13
14	15 Sukkot	16	17	18	19	20
21	22 Shemini Atzeret	23 Simhat Torah	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

away from the legal rules of the *kohanim* and delves deeply into the laws of all the holidays, the *hagim*. For many years, I struggled with these two halves in

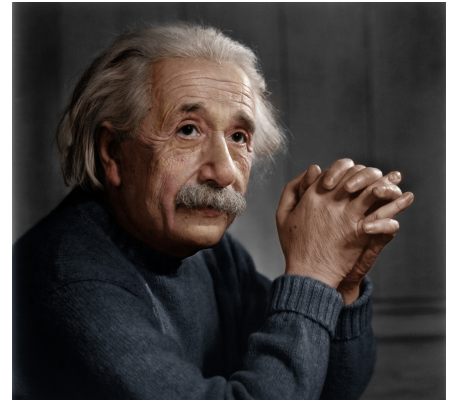
this *parashah*: what on earth does the litany of *kohanic* regulations have to do with celebrating all of our *hagim*?

But, of course, they are one and the same. The *kohanic* system transformed space and the *hagim*, our sacred days, transform time.

Time and space made holy in one *parashah*. Brilliant.

Perhaps our ancestors already knew something deep about space and time. Perhaps those who divided up the *parshiyot*, the portions, knew that space and time are actually one – interwoven into a single continuum.

While it would take thousands of years more until another pretty astute Jew proved that space and time are in fact enmeshed, it seems that our Torah has a profound understanding about it as well.



While the Torah does not explicitly state the theory of special relativity as Einstein did one hundred years ago, it does contain a deep truth about



the nature of space  
time.

This takes place  
when Moshe  
encounters the Divine  
at the Burning Bush.<sup>1</sup>  
In that most sublime

<sup>1</sup> God Appears to Moses in Burning Bush. Painting from Saint Isaac's Cathedral, Saint Petersburg, by Eugene Pluchart (1809-1880)

moment, Moshe asks God what is Your name?

God replies that Moshe should tell them: “*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Tell them *Ehyeh* sent me to you.” (Ex. 3:14)

Translating this is no simple matter, but *Ehyeh* is from the verb “*l’hiyot* – to be.” God is telling Moshe that the Divine name is: “I will be” or “I will be what I will be.”

Meaning, that God is beyond time; God is “IS-ness,” being itself. God is existence. God is found throughout this four dimensional universe we inhabit. God is space-time.<sup>2</sup>

To fully appreciate and/or understand this, let us break it down into theological steps.

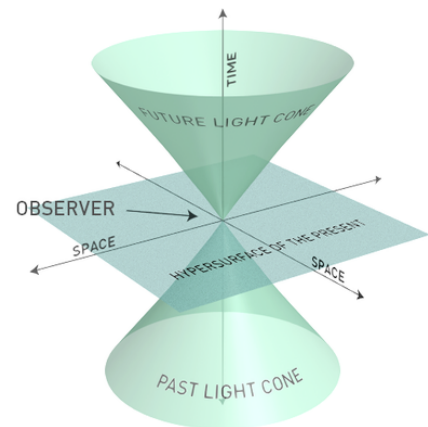
Before Judaism/ethical monotheism, people

believed that idols had power. Then along

comes Judaism and states, well, actually, there

is one Power in the universe and even more perplexingly, this Power has no shape or form.

That God is beyond space was still a really difficult concept. For a thousand years, the Israelites repeatedly slip up and forget that God is



---

<sup>2</sup> In special relativity, the Minkowski spacetime is a four-dimensional manifold created by Hermann Minkowski.

beyond space, worshipping idols<sup>3</sup>  
again and again.

In fact, it was Ezekiel – the  
same prophet we read in our *haftarah*  
today – who, 2600 years ago, taught  
that God is not only in Jerusalem,



God is everywhere. After the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in  
the year 586 BCE, Ezekiel explained that God is not found merely in the  
axis from heaven to earth anchored in Jerusalem, but, utilizing his vision of  
a throne with wings, he imagined that God was journeying with Israelites  
into exile. Therefore, God was not confined to one space, but found in all  
space.

But while Judaism pushed this notion of God's presence in all  
spaces, the deeper magic is found in our sanctification of time. Just as we  
can transform space, we can transform time.

Time is where we can really sense God. Time is where we can truly  
sense our tradition's power to help us sense God, the Mystery of the world.

---

<sup>3</sup> Free Bible images, Golden Calf (<http://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/moses-golden-calf/>)



Becoming aware of time demands our full attention to a moment, to being present in that moment, to the oneness of that moment.



I heard a musician, a drummer. Moshe Kedem from Congregation *Navah Tehilla* in Jerusalem, speak this week about time. He explained that he spent lots of time studying time – the beat, the metronome, the splitting up of time. 24 hours in a day, 60 minutes in an hour, 60 seconds to a minute – it is all perfectly regimented,

mathematical formulae.

But then, he reminded us that it is all artificial. Time could be divided up differently and can be experienced very differently. He said: “Is one hour with your grandchildren the same as one hour with your boss? Is one hour in the dentist chair the same as one hour with your beloved?”



No, they are not. Because we experience them in distinctive ways.

The true genius of our tradition is realizing that we can create sacred time. That was the innovation of Shabbat, of separating one day out of every seven and creating holy time.

That was the idea of the *Omer* – of counting the seven weeks from Passover and the Exodus until Shavuot and the Revelation at Sinai. And here we are on day 28 – three weeks to go! The excitement is building!



But Shabbat is the pinnacle of the heightened awareness of time. It is the crown of all the *hagim*, of all the holidays. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel presented the following metaphor: Shabbat is a cathedral in time. Imagine the grandeur of an enormous cathedral, its ceiling soaring toward the heavens and now apply that to time. That is Shabbat.



So how do we do that? First, let's acknowledge that it is not easy. It is not. There are so many things to take us out of the Shabbat in our modern, fast-paced, constantly taking selfies and posting them on Instagram world we inhabit.



Instagram

But maybe that's where we should start. Give yourself one day without your phone. If that's too much – try part of Shabbat for starters. But I mean a real break: no calls, no texts, no emails, no pictures. Turn it off. Just be present. Go on a hike and talk to the person next to you, no texting them!

No posting. No social media. I know this is hard. I like Facebook – people even said to me: “Rabbi, we knew you were feeling a little better when you starting to post on Facebook!” It's true – to paraphrase Descartes, ‘I post, therefore, I am!’ But enough, give it a rest for 25 hours.

Be totally present with yourself and those around you. See how that changes time. See how it can change your conversations, your relationships, your connection to God, yourself.

And let's go even further, let's try making other moments sacred during the week. I cannot tell you how many meetings I sit in when the participants are texting and looking at their phones during the conversation. I understand that our brains are being rewired to multitask on some level, but I also know the value of a real conversation, of really talking to someone. No distractions. Just the intensity and challenge of being truly present with another.

Last semester, I had to change my policy about cell phones in class. So, I took out my smartphone, turned it off (not to vibrate or mute, but actually off!) and had my students do the same.

Then we piled them all in the middle of the table where they could not be touched during class. Now, don't get me wrong – there are still other distractions for students in class, but I could eliminate at least that one.



That is my new meeting policy. Unless there is an emergency reason, please turn off your cell phone when you come into my office for a meeting and I will do the same for you.

Suddenly, now, we can look at each other without any device and experience each other's presence. For that is exactly why Shabbat was created. All of its laws and intricacies assist us in experiencing time and each other on a different plane.

\* \* \*

It might be easier to feel the sacredness of a moment in Simi Valley, in Jerusalem, or even here, in this magnificent space, but we should always remember that we can transform any space and, most powerfully, time itself.

We merely need to put away our distractions and notice where we are and where the others around us are. Then we can truly be present in space-time, in God's sacred space-time, which is all that is.

