SACRED SPACE AND HOLY TIME

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In Greek culture the ultimate values focused on "the good, the true and the beautiful." Indeed, in our sacred Scriptures, and most particularly in Genesis 1, we are taught that what God made on each of the first six days of Creation was *good*, sometimes even *very good*, but added to the value of *good*, is that of holiness.

On the Seventh Day, we arrive at that ultimate value, what our liturgy refers to as the *"sof ma'aseh, b'mahshava te'hilla* [the last of Creation but the first in intention]," the Holy Shabbat. Only in **time** can holiness be inherently found. Abraham Joshua Heschel often spoke of the landscape of time residing within the calendar of our holidays, festivals and sabbaths.

The very language of the Torah confirms this hypothesis. It was the Shabbat that God blessed as God had blessed the Adam earlier in Genesis 1:28. But only the Shabbat received the distinction of being called inherently holy *and hallowed it* [va'yekadesh oto] (Gen. 2:3). The holiness of the Shabbat cannot be abrogated or nullified, even as time cannot be undone.

Whereas Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden and as Israel was driven into exile by the forces of history from Eretz Yisrael, Israel's faith and culture would never be deprived of its devotion to the Shabbat. Like the Torah itself, the Shabbat is portable. The Shabbat can suffer no dislocation.

Yet the Bible establishes and allows an element of holiness to exist within space as well, albeit according to some authorities as an afterthought in the wake of Israel's worship of the Golden Calf. According to Rashi, there is no earlier or later in the Torah. The episode of the Golden Calf preceded the commandment to construct the Tabernacle.[1] Thus, the establishment of holy space within the confines of the Tabernacle came about only as a concession to Israel's needs, not as an aspect of God's own agenda for the spiritual life of humankind.

The holiness of the Tabernacle was of such magnitude that it was the obligation of the priests to protect the Tabernacle against encroachment by strangers, the impure and the unfit. We read: *The Levites shall stand guard around the Tabernacle of the pact* (Num. 1:53). This idea is enhanced by the

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following statement: *They shall take charge* [v'shamru] *of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting doing the work of the Tabernacle* (3:6-8). The Hebrew word *v'shamru* is central to my theme.

A holy place was to be safeguarded by limiting access to it. Thus Moses, on seeing the burning bush, was told *'Do not come closer'* (Ex. 3:5); on Mount Sinai, at the giving of the Torah, Moses is commanded *'You shall set bounds for the people round about saying, Beware of going up the mountain'* (19:12). Levites were camped around the Tabernacle but only priests could enter it. After the Temple was erected in Jerusalem, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only on the day of Yom Kippur.

The Levites are delegated to serve as Israel's surrogates in the management of and service to the sacred space of the Tabernacle. In so doing, they are charged with the responsibility of guarding the Tabernacle against the encroachment of the unfit and the profane. They are so charged because they are the appointed agents of the folk on whose behalf they maintain the holy precincts.

CONTINUUM OF HOLY SPACE AND HOLY TIME

The language in the Book of Numbers is nearly identical to an equivalent passage in the Book of Exodus regarding the Shabbat. The vocabulary should not be dismissed out of hand and considered coincidental. The text in Exodus reads: *The Israelite people will stand guard* [v'shamru] *over the Shabbat . . . doing the service of the Shabbat throughout the generations as a covenant for all time* (31:16-17). The Hebrew is nearly a verbatim parallel to the earlier citations from Numbers 1:53. Only now Israel becomes the guarantor of that sanctity known as the Shabbat and built into time.

If indeed Israel is charged time and again to realize its destiny as a *kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (19:6) then Israel's priesthood status is designed to prevent the encroachment of the unholy onto the holy. All Israel is required to guard against the encroachment of the profane and the commonplace into the Shabbat: work, commerce, business, and weekday activities.

It is in the particular juxtaposition of the Shabbat and the building of the Tabernacle that we find my thesis joined and clarified. In Exodus 31, we find a telling juxtaposition of holy time and holy precinct. Bezalel, together with

Oholiab, is assigned the responsibility of building the Tabernacle. However: *Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbath* (31:12). We see that the joining of sacred space and sacred time at the conclusion of Exodus 31 affirms the supremacy of sacred time over holy space. The building of the Tabernacle must yield to the ultimate sanctity of time.

Abraham Joshua Heschel made the Shabbat the center of the life of Judaism. One of his last works is the book *Israel, An Echo of Eternity,* and it was the genius of Heschel to draw in this title a parallelism of space and time. The Torah lays claim on our attention to the sacred space of Israel, the Land and the Tabernacle at its heart. Nevertheless the Shabbat exists independently of the Land as do the Jewish people now and forever obligated to tend the Shabbat as its own "echo of eternity."

Holy space is an extract of the infinite. Holy time is the Shabbat's 25-hour extract of eternity. If indeed there is a space/time continuum, one might compare it to the body/soul relationship. If the body of Israel is the Land, then the soul of the Jewish people is the Shabbat. When joined, the climax is one of spiritual ecstasy.

NOTES

1. See Rashi on Exodus 31:18.

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