



Torah for Turbulent Times: **"Transforming Tradition & Our Tables - From the Ancient Altar to Our Homes"**

This past Shabbat was a real “Shehekianu moment,” our first Zoom Mitzvah for the community and for the Rockmore family! From the comfort of our homes we joined in celebration for this essential Jewish rite of passage. Torah verses were chanted, Haftorah was sung, and a heartfelt speech was delivered. There were tears of joy, as we all gathered to celebrate on the collective couch with the family dog nearby. We tossed virtual candy towards our screens and sang “siman tov u’mazal tov,” as Rachel became not only a bat mitzvah but a Jewish pioneer. With bravery and courage she helped our community embrace it’s first Zoom mitzvah. It was both different, and the same - both a small step and a giant leap forward during this time of pandemic. From the ancient altar to our homes, from the Temple to the “Temple of Zoom,” we are transforming our tradition and our tables too.

We’re not the first or the last to do this. As we read from the opening of the Book of Leviticus this past Shabbat, we encountered the ancient rite of sacrifice and the book’s larger theme of holiness. For many of us the animal sacrifices of the ancient altar are a hard concept to swallow. If we are able to get beyond the bloody details and entrails of sacrifice, we see how this Biblical system brought structure to the lives of our ancestors during uncertain times. In short, it provided a way to handle the schmutz and the setbacks, the guilt and the gratitude, that comes along with life. I imagine it must have felt comforting and sustaining to our

Biblical predecessors, as beyond just a corrective it also provided a sacred means for food and nourishment.

With the destruction of the Temple during Roman Times came the demolition of the system of sacrifice. Symbolically though it remains with us, moving from the ancient altar to our homes, specifically our tables. A Rabbinic teaching notes that since our altar has vanished, our tables, the places where we gather together for food and fellowship, now replace what once was. (see Ezekiel 41:22 where an “altar” in Hebrew is defined as both “mizbeach/altar” and “shulchan/table”) The form looks different, but the function is the same. And now you have the answer to the most oft-asked question, “Rabbi, why do we put salt on our challah?” It’s reminiscent of the ancient altar and functions to help transform and elevate our tables. Our tables are not just places to meet and eat. Rather, they are spaces that can transform our mundane munching into meaningful moments of sanctity. Our tables are our altars, however they may look. Whether messy or clean, loud or quiet, with paper plates or fine china, sad or joyous, they are a place of refuge in the midst of life’s tempest.

Being stuck at home in quarantine, we find ourselves gathered around the table even more than we’re used to. For some, this is a silver lining. There’s a little more time for cooking and lingering longer. Ultimately, the sacrifices made by our ancestors, and those made today, along with prayer and gathering together as a community, all serve a single purpose. Each bite at our tables, each conversation, each blessing, and even each silent moment in between, all have the potential to bring us “karov/close.” This Hebrew word for “close or near” is related to the Hebrew word for “sacrifice, korban,” which served to bring humanity closer to each other and to G-d.

When pandemic life dizzies us in a whirlwind of feelings, emotions, and challenges, it can be a comfort to simply have a central place in our home to retreat to. On the one hand, we grieve for the loss of life around us, for life as it was, and for being able to physically gather in our schools, workplaces and sanctuary. After all, Jewish life is meant to be lived together. On the other hand, we continue to

celebrate life's milestones and what was anticipated long ago. That is, our homes, with their central altar tables, can become our sanctuaries.

-Rabbi Mark
