

## Drasha for Shabbat Pinchas- July 19, 2025

This drash is dedicated to Rabbi Kelman who has taught me so much about liturgy and prayer. He has always encouraged me to find my own answers to my questions.

I became interested in this parashah two years ago, not because of the complicated story lines, but because it referred to the twice daily Tamid sacrifice. A commentary on page 930 in our Chumash notes that the Sages determined that prayer, specifically the Amidah, substitutes for the Tamid sacrifices that were paid for by the community for their communal benefit. I looked at the prayers in the Amidah that we recite to this day, and I was struck by one prayer, in particular. It is on page 163 in the Shacharit Amidah, and in a more condensed form, on page 189 in the Musaf Amidah and it is translated as follows:

Adonai our God, embrace your people Israel and their prayer. Restore worship to your sanctuary. May the prayers of the people Israel be lovingly accepted by You and may our service always be pleasing. May our eyes behold your compassionate return to Zion. Baruch Atah Adonai, who restores your Divine Presence to Zion.

And I asked myself three questions. If these are our communal prayers, that is, prayers of and for our community, what does it mean for me, a proud Diaspora Jew, to pray for the return of worship to God's sanctuary; what does it mean to pray for God's presence to return to Zion, and do these prayers express my hopes for our messianic redemption?

Let's start with the first part – restoring worship to God's sanctuary. This is traditionally considered to mean rebuilding the Temple, and less commonly, as restoration of the sacrifices. The new Daily Lev Shalem (available now for per-order) views this prayer as a reminder of and yearning for a past intimacy with God. However, there is currently a community of messianic Zionists in Israel whose stated aim is to restore worship as described in the Torah, abandoning 2500 years of Jewish practice.

Centralization of worship at one great Temple in Jerusalem happened after the period of the Torah. When Dr. Ben Sommer was here in February as scholar in residence, he pointed out that there were local alters in many communities in ancient Israel where Levites and priests offered prayers and probably had offered sacrifices before there was a Temple in Jerusalem.

Sacrifices were the way that ancient peoples entreated their God. Maimonides reasoned that Biblical sacrifices were a transitional step in ending idolatry, a concession made to the cultural milieu of the Biblical era to people who thought sacrifices were necessary to connect with God. He thought that sacrifices would not be restored in Messianic times. In this he was following the teachings of the prophets who noted that sacrifices were inferior to living according to God's laws and caring for each other.

But we, **here**, do more than entreat when we pray – we also express gratitude and praise. While prayers are less visceral than sacrifice, when we come together in community, we create a mishkan, a place for God to dwell. We invite God in. When my husband, Dale, and I were married, the rabbi told us to make our home a mikdash me'at – a small holy place where God is welcome. In fact, one of the names for God is HaMakom, the place. The destruction of the Temple, and the exile of the Israelites from the land, did not exile us from our God. As we say every day in the Ashrei, Karov Adonai L'chol Korav. Adonai is near to all who call.

Which brings me to my second question – what does it mean for us to pray for God's presence to return to Zion? Is this a reference to Isaiah's messianic vision of all peoples worshipping at God's holy mountain? Certainly, the many descendants of Abraham have a special connection to Jerusalem, though we do not all call God by the same name. We Jews have an attachment to the land that we call Zion- it is our homeland, though I should note that we first accepted the covenant as a people, at Sinai, outside the land. But do we need to return to the land to live fully as God's people? At the time that the land was gifted to Abraham and his descendants, people believed that gods had their own territories, where they were supreme. But as we know from Psalm 24, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. God is not limited to one territory. That same question about

centralization of worship applies to the need for centralization of peoplehood. As the prophet Samuel warned the Israelites, we are not meant to be a nation like other nations. And the later prophets provided witness to the fact that living in the land, under one government, did not ensure that we lived the way God intended, nor did it guarantee safety, an observation that rings as true today as it did in Biblical times.

Dr. David Kraemer, professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the JTS, and author of the book Embracing Exile, The Case for Jewish Diaspora, observes that the Torah was canonized in Babylonia, allowing us to strengthen our connection with God by creating a portable spiritual home and separating it from our connection with the land. We should note that, while the rabbis of Babylonia and beyond may have prayed for God to return to Zion, they themselves did not, for the most part, return to the land when the opportunity arose. Nor have subsequent generations of Jews, including ourselves! Most of us are satisfied with the periodic pilgrimage to the land of our ancestors. In fact, Rav Judah stated that “Whoever lives in Babylonia it is as if he lived in the Land of Israel”. Over time, other places where Jews have thrived have been considered by some to be as Zion.

We, in the diaspora, have created forms of community worship, care, and values that are inspiring and inclusive, while we are also living and working among people who worship God in different ways. Living in the diaspora, exposed to different people and ideas, has also enriched our Judaism. To be Jews in the Diaspora, we must consciously choose Judaism and make it ours, like Abraham himself who left the land of his birth and created a community that worshipped the One God, among strangers. Our responsibility, as Jews, whether in the land or in the diaspora is to build a world of Hesed and Tzedek, for ourselves and for the strangers in our midst and around us. Our role is to be at the nexus of the particular with the universal.

So, returning to my starting questions, does this prayer reflect my wants and needs today for our community, both in the Diaspora and in Ha-aretz? For me, living with the modern nation state of Israel, the answer is “No”. I find that it is too easy to conflate political Zionism with liturgical Zion.

Now, I am turning this back to you, my community. In a few minutes we will be praying the Musaf Amidah, the special offering for Shabbat. Wisely, the Amidah ends with gratitude and a prayer for peace. What else do **you** pray for? What do you want for our community, now and in the messianic future? I am sure that you have better ideas than I have, but I found one prayer that appeals to me in this time when there is so much baseless hatred. It is found on page 106 of our siddur, though I like the translation better in the weekday siddur:

Kadesh et Shimcha al Makdishai Shmaycha vkadesh at shmaycha b'olamecha.

Manifest holiness in Your world through those who hallow You, raising us to dignity and strength. Praised are you, Adonai, manifesting Your holiness to all humanity. Baruch Atah Adonai, M'kadesh et Shimcha BaRabim.

Shabbat Shalom

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