

## Emor – 5783

Our son Noah's in-laws, our machitonim, are both Sabras. They were born in Israel at time when the Israelis were revelling in the revolutionary idea that the Jewish people had laid claim to their homeland. Their generation of Israelis passionately embraced the land, its history, and its geography. Their generation gloried in the many beautiful and wondrous places that were there to be discovered and explored and as they grew up, new discoveries were being made almost every day. The prime example of this is, of course, Masada, which had just been opened to the public the year I was first in Israel, 1964. But there were others and there still are new explorations and discoveries constantly.

Since the first time we met Benni and Miri, every time we visited, they arranged a day tiyyul, travelling by car to out-of-the-way places that they have grown to love, and they wanted to share with us. This past month was no exception. Marlene and I rented our own car for the month (it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the strength and will to either walk a great deal or take advantage of the excellent public transportation. So went in two cars, but it is always fascinating for me to drive in Israel because I always have my memories of buses and single lane roads all over the country back in 1964.

So, where did we go? We went to a national park called Beit Shearim. It is not too far from Haifa on the edge of Emek Yisrael, the so called Jezreel Valley. Over the last several decades it has been the site of continuous archeological study. Why? Because it is the burial place of many of the rabbis from the first several centuries after the destruction of the second temple, chief among them Rabbi Judah HaNasi, the so-called head of the Sanhedrin. What was that you are probably asking. Well, while we all speak about the destruction of the second temple and the exile of our people from Jerusalem, few think about how the Jewish people evolved from a

society focussed on the Temple in Jerusalem and sacrifices carried out by the Kohanim as dictated in the verses of the Torah, to a people all over the world responding to the words of the Rabbis who became the transmitters and interpreters of the words we read every week. The Sanhedrin was the collection of these seminal voices that provided the bridge from Temple to Synagogue and Judah HaNasi was its president for a goodly number of years. These men bear the names of the voices we read in the Haggadah for Pesach, in the Ethics of the Fathers and in the many collections around the Mishnah and the Talmud. Collectively, over several centuries their words and their voices became what we now refer to as Rabbinic Judaism. However, over the early centuries of the common era, as the Jewish people moved across the face of the known world, no one position became more important than another. We often hear about Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai and the arguments that ensued over how to interpret and adapt the waves of change impacting the life of the Jewish people. The question was always, for all these past centuries, what does it mean for the Jewish people and how ought we to respond.

Fast forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the winds of change brought about by the enlightenment. As people became more literate and came to know more of the world around them, as science affected great changes throughout Europe, more and more accommodations and adaptations had to be made that reflected the wishes and the needs of the people but still remained true to the spirit of Judaism as it had evolved over two millennia and as it was expressed in the Torah, our roadmap to how to live our lives. The Torah as reflective especially in the pages of Leviticus pushes us to live lives of holiness, aspire to seek justice and to treat each other as we would want to be treated ourselves.

Needless to say, while we were a people in our own homeland, led by the priestly caste, and focussed on the temple in Jerusalem, over these many centuries, not everyone ever saw eye to eye on what was appropriate. That is the root cause of

all the things that we read about and see sometimes throughout each and every day right now in Israel. To the best of my knowledge, no one has pointed to the schism in Israel in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Neturei Karta rabbis refused to accept the legitimacy of the government of the state because we created the state through our own actions. It was not created through an act of HaShem as foretold in the Tanach. If we look at the tensions in Israeli society today and why the Ultra-Orthodox are so intent on destroying the power of the Supreme Court of Israel to protect the rights of all of the citizens of the state, it is because they refuse to acknowledge that there exists a secular court that is able to rule against the religious courts. This is what leads to the primary question confronting Israel today. Will it be a Jewish State, i.e., reflective of Jewish law and practice, as dictated by the decisions of the rabbis or a State of the Jews, in which the decisions of the Knesset and the Supreme Court attempt to find that balance between the words of the Torah and the need to adapt to cultural, social, political change as the Sanhedrin did all those centuries ago.

Our parsha this week begins with the words – “And God said to Moses, speak to the Priests, the sons of Aaron” and then proceeds to lay out what it means for them to be holy and what it means for holiness to be reflected in the ebb and flow of the lives of the Jewish people through the year. After the destruction of the Temple, and the evolution of the synagogue and its prominence throughout the Diaspora, first the Sanhedrin and then later the rabbis in each community did their best to understand how the Mishnah and the Talmud would guide the actions of the Jewish people wherever they found themselves across the face of the earth. In the modern age, the Zionist movement led to the idea of Kibbutz Galuyot, the ingathering of the exiles and the establishment of our State of Israel, we need a new generation of Sanhedrin scholars to help this generation and those to follow come to determine how Israel

can meld the modern world and our ancient Jewish traditions so that we can still continue to sing Am Yisrael Chai VeKayam.