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What Comes Next

Torah Reading: [Leviticus 21:1 - 24:23](#)
Haftarah Reading: [Ezekiel 44:15-31](#)

I hope that it is no spoiler by now to write here publicly that the first act of the smash musical “Hamilton” does not end where one might expect it to. The song “Yorktown” describes how (at no small cost) the revolutionaries of the American colonies win their war of independence, the British are defeated, the world is “turned upside down.” Why not drop the curtain right there?

As Jeremy McCarter writes in *Hamilton: the Revolution* (a compendium of the libretto of the show and essays about its development, the many people involved in the show, and the influences and artistry that went into the lyrics and staging), “‘Yorktown’ could have been a rousing finale for Act One, a way to send the audience to the lobby feeling precisely what they wanted to feel about the country’s birth” (124). But instead, an unexpected (if not entirely unfamiliar) figure – the newly no-longer-King of the Americans George III – steps out onto the stage and notes that “I’ve got a small query for you”:

What comes next?
You’ve been freed.
Do you know how hard it is to lead?

You're on your own.
Awesome. Wow.
Do you have a clue what happens now?

McCarter continues: "Lin [Manuel Miranda] could have made 'What Comes Next?' a simple comic turn, a lament by a petulant sore loser. Actually, the king is a petulant sore loser. But he asks the leaders of the new nation an unexpectedly sobering question... 'You have to end an act with a dramatic question,' says Tommy [Kail, the show's director]. 'Ending a war is not a question. What you do with that is the question.'"

That's a good question. But I'm guessing it's not the question you have at the moment. I'm guessing that question is: what has any of this to do with this week's parashah, Emor?

Glad you asked. Because I promise you there is a connection. I'll even go you one better: there's also a connection to our current moment in the Jewish calendar.

In the middle of this parashah is a chapter – Lev. 23 – commonly referred to Seder haMo'adim, the order of the festivals. In the course of the chapter, each of the major celebrations of the biblical holiday calendar is discussed. In fact, we read this passage every year not only during the week of Parashat Emor, but also on the first day of Sukkot, and outside of Israel on the second day (Yom Tov Sheni) of Passover. The great modern Torah commentator and scholar of classic exegesis, Nehama Leibowitz, notes an small, but significant detail in how the chapter is structured:

Closer study indicated that this order of festivals comprises two sections [verses 4-22 and 23-43]... The first section comprises the festivals of Pesah and Shavuot, and the second, the rest. Further, we may note that there is no traditional spacing at all between the paragraph dealing with Pesah and the verses treating of the succeeding festival — Shavuot — which is included in the description of the regulations concerning the counting of the Omer. The regulations concerning every festival are preceded by the introductory phrase "and the Lord spoke unto Moses saying," except in the case of Shavuot...

The connections between Pesah and Shavuot go even further:

Moreover, every feast is given its exact date... The date of Shavuot is, however, fixed only indirectly by the time that is to elapse between it and Pesah. (Studies in Vayikra [Leviticus], 218-19)

Here are (some of) the relevant verses themselves:

⁵In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover offering to the Lord, ⁶and on the fifteenth of that month the Lord's Feast of Unleavened Bread...

As part of this holiday, an offering of a sheaf of grain (omer in Hebrew, hence the name of this time period), marking the beginning of the harvest, was brought; this ceremony was to take place on "the day after the Sabbath" (v. 11). The passage continues:

¹⁵And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks... ¹⁶you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days;

then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord...²¹On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you..."

So subordinate is this holiday to Pesah in this passage that it is not given an independent name, though elsewhere, in other passages about the holiday cycle, it is known as the feast of the harvest (Ex. 23:16), the feast of weeks (Ex. 34:22 and Deut. 16:10; similarly Num. 28:26), and the day of the first fruits (Num. 28:26). Nor, in any of these passages, is it ever given a set date, as the other holidays are in Lev. and Num.

All of this leads Leibowitz to this crucial observation:

Evidently, there must be some integral connection between the concept of Pesah, and counting of the Omer and Shavuot, accounting for the latter's subordinate position as an appendage to the former two. (220)

The obvious question that follows – relevant especially because we are in precisely that in-between time, the Omer, at this very moment (as I write this on Monday, it is day 30) – is what is that connection? Why is this holiday, whatever we may call it, so intimately tied to Passover here?

The holiday of the bible is an agricultural one, tied to the first harvest at Passover time and the bringing of the first fruits seven weeks later at the high point of the harvest season (while Sukkot marks the end of the harvest season). Moreover, its date would seem to be flexible, if we understand "Sabbath" in both Lev. 23: 15 and 15 in its most common meaning, the seventh day of the week: i.e., one would start counting from the end of the Shabbat that took place during Passover (or perhaps just after Passover) – and the holiday would always fall on a Sunday. Yet that is not how/when we celebrate it today, nor how/when Jews have celebrated it since at least the time of the Mishnah. Shavuot has a set date: the 6th of Sivan, fifty days from the 2nd day of Passover.

Note that there is a name for this holiday that does NOT appear anywhere in Torah. Any of us who have ever said/heard Kiddush or prayed the Amidah on Shavuot should be familiar with this name: z'man matan Toratenu, the time of the giving of our Torah. Moreover, in the account of the revelation at Sinai/giving of the Torah in Ex. 19-20, the text is not entirely clear about the date of the event, other than to say that the Israelites arrive at the base of the mountain "In the third month" or perhaps (depending on how one translates/interprets) "On the third new moon" (Ex. 19:1) after the Exodus from Egypt, and that the revelation took place several days later. This is approximately seven weeks later, then, but the connection is not explicit. It was the rabbis of Late Antiquity, reading the word "Sabbath" in Lev. 23 as an expansive term that could also include "holiday" and hence set the day of the Omer offering and the start of the count on the 16th of Nissan, the day after the first day of Passover (the 15th), and who determined by exegesis of Ex. 19th that the day of the Revelation at Sinai took place on the 6th day of Sivan – now also the fixed date of Shavuot.

And as Leibowitz notes in her essay on this parashah, many commentators over the course of Jewish history intuited that they were not without reason for making the connection. The unusual language and construction of Lev. 23 is but a hint towards a deeper connection between Passover and the counting of the Omer and Shavuot, i.e., between Passover and the giving of the Torah.

Just as "Ending a war is not a question" – so too the freeing of a people from bondage; "What you do with that is the question." As Leibowitz writes, "The Exodus was therefore not an end in itself, but purely the means of freeing Israel from human bondage, enabling them to shoulder the divine yoke of Torah and its commandments" (221). It is no accident that another rabbinic name for this holiday is "Atzeret," the end, the completion – not only of the counting of the Omer, but of the redemption process initiated at the Exodus.

This, however, still leaves open at least one question: why does the Torah at best hint at this connection, rather than make it explicit? Leibowitz cites several commentators to the effect that while the Revelation at Sinai may have taken place on a particular day, at a particular place, the giving of Torah – and all the more so our receipt and acceptance of it – is actually not an end-point but an on-going process. To which I would add one more observation. As the rabbis note in a creative reading of Deut. 30:12, once the Torah was given at Sinai, it no longer (if one can say such a thing) fully “belongs” to God: “It is not in Heaven,” but rather in our hands. Every day it is our task to accept it anew, interpret it anew, and live by it anew.

And that is not an easy process. The challenges of building a new nation make up the theme of Act Two of “Hamilton,” and this theme is established and foreshadowed by the conclusion of Act One. In his Hamilton essay, McCarter notes that the founders themselves did not see winning the Revolutionary war as an end in itself: “John Adams...begged us to remember that the country’s birth was painful, contentious, and not remotely finished when the British went home: ‘It was patched and piebald policy then, as it is now, ever was and ever will be, world without end.’” So it was for the founders of the United States and so it most certainly is for the leaders and citizens of the United States today. During our current count of the Omer, we are eagerly anticipating (the recreation of) the moment when, for Jews, the world – or at least the mountain – is “turned upside down.” But the curtain hardly drops when we get to that day. In our human hands, Torah is both sublime and yet also sometimes “patched and piebald.” It can be no other way. The Exodus and the counting of the Omer does not culminate only in Shavuot, but in the challenging task of “what comes next,” our continuing task to make as best we can the world God would want us to, based on the Torah that is now in our very human hands. Shabbat shalom!

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