

Baccalaureate Shabbat is not one of the festivals listed in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Emor, from the Book of Leviticus- and yet I think it can teach us something special for this occasion in our communal lives.

Natural time is cyclical- spring follows winter and summer, spring. There is no natural beginning or ending of the year. In a similar way, morning follows night and evening, day- that a day starts at midnight is a human imposition.

Eileh Moadei Adonai, mikraei kodesh,—These are the set times of the Eternal, sacred occasions, asher tikra'u otam, as you shall call them. It is their designation as holy days that makes these special moments, and if we fail to call them so, then their specialness will go by and we will not experience it. So too with the transitions in our lives: if unmarked we will miss the opportunity to create holy time, but if we chose to, as Liz and Jonathan did this evening, then we can make them times of special blessing.

The portion includes a full calendar of the Jewish festivals, Shabbat, Passover, Shavuot, and Succot along with Rosh Hashanah, nameless in this text, merely the day of the sounding of the shofar, and Yom Kippur, which has its name. There are five different listings of the festivals in the Torah, two in Exodus and one each in

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The differences between them remind us that though fixed in time, the meaning of the holidays change with the centuries.

Shavuot for example, is mentioned here only for its agricultural importance. In future generations it will become the celebration of the Giving of the Torah, which is its primary meaning today.

We might expect Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to get the most attention, but it is actually Passover and Shavuot which dominate this calendar along with the days between, the Omer days which we are in the middle of tonight.

Commentators note that while common practice is to count down- only 12 days left until summer vacation, for example, during the Omer we count up, engaging in a figurative climb up Mt Sinai. Tonight we count 32 days of the Omer, heading toward 49. This counting up parallels the lighting of the Hanukah candles about which Shammai and Hillel argued. Shammai insisted that we should light 8 candles the first night, 7 the second, and so forth but Hillel responded that we increase holiness and don't decrease it, adding a candle each night. This becomes a reminder that each day is the opportunity to add something to our lives, rather than merely to exist until we reach some special moment. We have all heard

people say when I get to school, I will startwhen I leave this job, I will.....while the opportunity for self-improvement is here each day.

Finally, it is interesting that in this week's Torah portion, we interrupt the holiday calendar with the commandment to share our harvest with those in need:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger, I am Adonai.”

For the generations of Jews who lived after the destruction of the Temple and could no longer bring the sacrifices described in Leviticus, it was these gifts to the poor, that became our gifts to God. It also created a practice that every celebration, every happy occasion, was a chance to participate in the mitzvah of tzedakah, so that our joy could be widely shared.

As graduating high school students, I am sure you will be given many graduation gifts, perhaps not fountain pens and oxford dictionaries these days, but new computers and Dr. Seuss's The Places You Will Go. Along with those gifts perhaps a grandparent or other family member, will do what is traditional, that is to make a donation to a worthy cause in your honor. I hope this too will bring you joy as you have the opportunity to share your joy with others.