

Torah Tidbits – July 28, 2014

This week we begin Moses' very long farewell speech, while we simultaneously relive the final days of the Temple. Both of them, actually.

Given what is also going on in the world at large these days, I sometimes get a bit emotionally confused.

We are sad as a people that even the trappings of independence were destroyed, twice. Yet few of us would actually want the Temple, as it existed then, to exist in today. Completely burning animals when there are people starving on the planet seems troublesome, for example.

Yet imagine for a moment that the Temple had not been destroyed, and the ethical lessons of the prophets had been taken to heart. What could the Temple be like today?

It would still be a place of pageantry, and the musical capital of the Jewish world.

It would retain a hierarchy, and perhaps be the only place where the difference between Kohen, Levi and Israel still mattered.

It would be the largest entity supporting those who were hungry due to famine and drought, for as soon as word was received that all the money was kept by the Temple, the money would dry up. [God does not need to be given back what is already God's; God needs us to act as proper partners.]

The job of Temple representatives to the scattered Jewish communities would be to remind the people that they must care about others in the midst of their daily lives.

Perhaps, though, if the Temple still existed, it might be no different than many other institutions, and become concerned about its own existence to the exclusion of all other issues. This would be a great Hillul HaShem (ruining of God's reputation), and possibly it is better to have a destroyed Temple which we remember than a thriving Temple which we are ashamed of.

Moses' final speech is a bit like that. He answers the question, "Why are we here, now?" in a way that places all the blame on those who are dead, so that complaints will be seen to be ineffectual. The message seems to be that since we can't change the past or yell at the people who got us into this mess we should act in such a way that the future will be better.

To get this message across, Moses winds up changing a few details of the story. We'll discuss this more on Shabbat, but if you want to get a hint, compare the story of the spies from the middle of Numbers and the tale of the spies that Moses tells their children.