

Shabbat Emor  
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Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

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## Pilgrimage

Our neighbor died this week. Former Alderman Leon Despres lived in our building long enough to have our stretch of Stony Island renamed in his honor, despite (or because of) the fact that he did his best to make life difficult for Mayor Daley *père*. Enough will be in the papers and on the air that I do not need to eulogize him here. I'm thinking more of the way he managed to make a very long life – 101 years – lived almost completely on the South Side of Chicago, into a pilgrimage of justice-seeking and honest dealing. Why does simple integrity strike us as heroic? It should be commonplace, but, alas, it is not.

It brings to mind the poem, written by a contemporary rabbinic colleague, Alvin Fine, that has become a staple of Reform Jewish funerals and memorial services. You know, the one that begins,

Birth is a beginning,  
And death a destination;  
But life is a journey,  
A going – a growing  
From stage to stage.

The way all the reports about Len emphasize that he almost never won a vote in the City Council, but insisted that it was important to state your case, even when the Mayor turned off your microphone, brings to mind the part of Rabbi Fine's poem that goes

From defeat to defeat to defeat—  
Until, looking backward or ahead,  
We see that victory lies  
Not at some high place along the way,  
But in having made the journey,  
Stage by stage-  
A sacred pilgrimage.

The calendar that is laid out in this week's parashah, Emor, is one of three calendars that are collected in the Torah. As you know, three of our major festivals are known as *hagim*, cognate to the Arabic *haji*, festivals of pilgrimage. For each *hag*, offerings are specified to be brought to the Temple, two in particular from the new crop of grain: the *omer* sheaf of new barley and the *bikkurim* offering of the first fruits. The Torah considers this offering a sacrifice and emphasizes the importance of sacrifice as recognition that I am not the possessor of what I think I own.

On my various "pilgrimages" to Safed in Israel, home of Rabbi Isaac Luria and his kabbalistic friends, I usually stop in at the synagogue associated with Rabbi Moshe Alsheich. He is cited in a commentary from Rabbi Alana Alpert. Alsheich offers, she says,

a radical reading of the verse, "and when you reap the harvest of your land," that dispels the myth of ownership ... He points out that "your land" is plural [ie., the *your* is plural], explaining that "the Torah uses the plural to designate the common ownership of the field by the owner, the poor, and the stranger, for in truth, they share in it... Do not think that you are giving to the poor from your own possession, or that I despised the poor person by not giving him as I gave you. For he is my son, as you are, and his share is in your grain; it is to your benefit to give him his share from your property."<sup>1</sup>

This is surely a key verse of the Torah, repeated here from last week's reading of the Holiness Code. A harvest is complete only when it is left incomplete. We do not reap all the way to the edges, nor may we go back and pick up what has been dropped. The corners (*pe'ah*) and the gleanings (*leket*) are left for others—it is their rightful share.

So too with our lives – what is important is not what we accumulate, but what we leave behind. And I do not mean the size of the bequest left to our heirs. Rather, I mean, of course, those things – a smile, a cry for justice, a

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<sup>1</sup> Torat Moshe on Leviticus 19. Translation from: David Hartman, Tzvi Marx, Noam Zion. *The Dynamics of Tzedakah: From Dependence to Dignity*. Jerusalem: The Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Studies, 2006. Cited by Rabbi Alana Alpert at [http://www.ajws.org/what\\_we\\_do/education/publications/dvar\\_tzedek/5769/emor.html](http://www.ajws.org/what_we_do/education/publications/dvar_tzedek/5769/emor.html)

word of encouragement – that are left/given to others. Often, they are the things we may not even realize we have dropped. Once in a while, someone will mention, years later, something you once said or did, that was picked up by them like a precious spark of holy light, and carried with them on their own pilgrimage.

It was a great privilege to attend Leonard Cohen's concert this week. He has always sounded old, and has now aged into that persona. The entire concert was a gift, an offering, an extended benediction. It included many of his best-known lines. "There is a crack in everything; that's where the light gets in." A kabbalistic image for sure, of the world's brokenness, which is precisely what gives us the opportunity to gather the holy sparks that are strewn across our own path of pilgrimage. Sometimes our brokenness is all we have to offer, and that too is a sacrifice, a spark of holiness.

The offerings brought to the Temple were prepared with great care, presented publicly with ceremony, singing, and celebration. They supported the institutions that in turn tied together the sense of community and represented the presence of God in the midst of the nation. The stalks of grain left lying in the field sustained the families of the poor and the strangers who did not feel invited to the banquet in the King's palace. Both kinds of offering are important, but the sheaves that are left behind are the ones that make the difference between life and death. What we carry with us on our pilgrimage is not as important as what we leave for others.

The image of gleaning always brings to mind the story of Ruth. I imagine her trekking with her mother-in-law, Naomi, during these weeks of counting the Omer, so that she will arrive in time for us to read her book on Shavuot, now just a few weeks away. Ruth is the pilgrim-stranger who comes to glean, who brings with her the love and faithfulness that shine through the cracks of broken-hearted grief. These are what go with us on our journey – the pilgrimage which requires of us the carefully prepared gifts, the Omer sheaf and the First Fruits, and the offerings left behind in the field, which belonged to us for a moment only – on condition that we give them away.