

The overarching theme of this parashah is *kadosh* – a word that appears so often and in so many different forms in our scriptures that it could be seen as the quintessential Jewish leitmotif. The Hebrew root קדש denotes something or someone set aside or designated as holy as an expression of deep awe and respect for HaShem. Because the priests functioned as the link between HaShem and the people, they and their families were held to the highest possible standards. Every aspect of their lives, from their interactions with others to their clothing and appearance, was strictly controlled in an effort to render them as perfect as a human being can be. These high standards were also applied to the offerings and to how, when, and where they were to be eaten. Nothing but the very best could be considered *kadosh*, i.e., fit to serve, or be presented to HaShem. Today this is reflected in how we dress and what we do on Shabbat and holidays, how we decorate our places of worship to fit the occasion, and in our Torah mantles, crowns, and pointers. It is also expressed in the respectful way we treat our Torah and our holy books, as well as in how we don our tallit and tefillin and behave while wearing them. These are all *kadosh*, set apart from our everyday lives to serve as our connection to HaShem and our covenant. The principle of *kadosh* is also reflected in how we measure time. Chapter 23 is the Torah's first comprehensive festival calendar of the sacred assemblies, along with their dates and basic ritual requirements. With one exception, they have all been mentioned earlier in the Torah, but never in a single, chronological list. As we read back in Parashat Bo (Exodus 12), Pesach is the first sacred assembly commanded by HaShem, instituted before the 10<sup>th</sup> plague in anticipation of the impending delivery from slavery. Although we quote Genesis 2:1-3 on Shabbat evening, the mitzvah of observing Shabbat is not mentioned until Exodus 16, in connection with gathering manna; it is then formalized in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11). Midrash and commentaries point out that this sequence is intentional and logical, because without Pesach, which commemorates the act that transformed slaves into an autonomous people, there can be no covenant. Shabbat is the sign of that covenant: "Between Me and the children of Israel it is an eternal sign that in six days the Lord created the heaven and the earth, and on the seventh day He ceased and rested." (Exodus 31:17) So logically, Pesach must precede Shabbat. Nonetheless, Chapter 23 begins with Shabbat. Drawing on the Sifra and other sources, Rashi teaches that the holiness of the festivals is comparable to Shabbat, hence its position here. Shabbat is unique because it was established by HaShem, whereas the calendar containing the festivals was established by the Israelites. Indeed, HaShem's very first commandment to the Israelites, even before the laws of Pesach, was to establish a calendar (Exodus 12:2). As slaves, they had no control over their time, but now they are commanded to set aside times for sacred assemblies to honor HaShem, the creator and ultimate arbiter of time. Like Shabbat, the three pilgrimage festivals and the *shmittah* and *yovel* cycles are built around the number seven: Shabbat comes once every seven days, Pesach and Sukkot are celebrated for seven days, there are seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, and the seventh month is full of holy days. Which brings us to the holiday we all know so well, but until now has never been mentioned: "... You must celebrate the first day of the seventh month as a day of rest – a remembrance of the shofar blast; a holy occasion." (23:24) The Torah does not call it Rosh HaShanah. That name first appears in Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 1, which enumerates the four new years and calls the first of Tishrei (the 7<sup>th</sup> month) *Rosh HaShanah l'shanim*: the new year for counting years. Tractate Rosh HaShanah 16a connects the shofar, which is made from a ram's horn, to the binding of Isaak, which is why the *akeidah* (Genesis 22) is the Torah reading for the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Rosh HaShanah. The calendar of sacred time ends here with Yom Kippur and Sukkot, but of course we know that other holidays will be added later. We are in the middle of the seven-week Omer counting period between Pesach and Shavuot. This was so important that cutting the daily sheaf of barley for the Omer offering overrode the prohibition of cutting on Shabbat. Barley, the first grain to ripen, was particularly valuable. It was forbidden to reap from any newly grown crop of the five species of grain (barley, wheat, oats, rye, and spelt) before the harvesting of the Omer. The sheaves were cut with great ceremony, especially on Shabbat, and offered with fervent prayer for a successful wheat crop. It is noteworthy that at the end of the Omer discussion, the Torah reiterates the prohibition against harvesting to the edges of our fields and directive to leave what remains of the gleanings for the poor and the stranger, ending with "I am the Lord, your God." (23:22). This is *kadosh* manifested through actions. We still count the Omer, but now many of us do so using the symbolism of the seven lower *Sefirot*, the emanations, or attributes of divine creative energy that operate between the world of HaShem and our world. Each of the seven weeks and each of its seven days is defined by a *sefirah*. Thursday evening we begin the week of *Hod*, a small word with many meanings that encompass majesty and splendor, praising, honoring, and adorning, along with humility and serving – the quintessence of Chapter 23. *Hod* is associated with Aaron, who establishes the ritual system it outlines. Through Aaron's *hod* we learn that holiness is not ours to possess, but to safeguard. It is now up to us to carry sacred time, sacred memory, and sacred responsibility forward.

Shabbat shalom!