Good morning, and Shabbat Shalom. This morning’s Torah Portion is Parshat Pinchas, from BaMidbar, the book of Numbers.

Every Shabbat is unique, with its own particular holiness, but I want to let you know one of the ways that today is special. Today, our Beth Shalom community has invited members of Seattle Tilth’s Food & Faith Initiative into our sacred home, to pray, learn, and share a meal with us, then visit our beautiful garden. Food & Faith members represent many different faith traditions, all of which in some way sense the deep connection between their faith and the garden. The Food & Faith program has helped faith communities get started building their gardens, and helps them forge ongoing bonds of connection with each other.

So if you see someone sitting nearby who looks new, you may have encountered one of our faith gardeners! Please befriend them quickly! I know many of Beth Shalom’s own gardeners are here this morning too. We’ll have tables set up in the social hall marked for Food & Faith conversations during lunch. If you’re a gardener, or would like to meet the gardeners, please look for one of them. And everyone is invited to join us at 1:15 in the garden.

The garden is a place where it’s easy to experience wonder. There are so many currents flowing in the garden that it’s difficult to spend time there and avoid being drawn deeper into its mysterious worlds. At Beth Shalom, our garden, which we call Gan Shalom (garden of peace) is a place of wonder.

Jason Schneier, a long time Beth Shalom member, is our community’s master gardener. He starts most of our plants from seeds at his home, then lets us gardeners know when it’s time to plant and harvest them. He prunes the grape vines and builds rich soil in the compost heap. Although I have been helping coordinate the gardeners who water, weed, and harvest, I rarely see Jason at work. He keeps his own schedule. But when I do see him, he reveals new mysteries of the garden to me.

This spring, I asked Jason if there might be a suitable activity the religious school kids could do in the garden in early May, in the weeks following Pesach. And astonishingly to me, there was **a barley crop** growing! Jason had planted it to fix nitrogen and to use as “green manure,” but to me this meant that when Rachel Wachtel, our Education Director, and Rochelle Wynn, our volunteer in charge of religious school garden programming, brought the kids outside to learn in the garden in early May, the students could each cut an “Omer,” a sheaf of real barley, while they were learning to “count the Omer,” a mysterious ritual that connects our holidays of Pesach and Shavuot. This is just one of myriad examples of how our garden serves as a teaching garden, manifesting the agricultural cycles that are so often at the root of the holidays we celebrate.

A few weeks ago, on our Mitzvah day, a five year old girl joined us as a garden volunteer to harvest potatoes. But it wasn’t the potatoes she was interested in - it was the earthworms, the snails, the millipedes, and the rolley polleys, that she was drawn to. She tenderly moved each tiny creature out of the way of the potato harvesters. For her, it was a day of discovering amazing new friends within the animal kingdom. For the rest of us, it was a day of hands in the soil, conversations, plus a healthy dose of awe and amazement that 30 lbs of potatoes had been lurking quietly in the dirt.

Over the course of the year, our gardeners plan the planting season, build beds, plant seeds, weed paths, make friends, share stories, water plants, cut flowers, eat Marion Berries, and harvest spinach, radishes, lettuce, potatoes, and onions, (so far) and deliver them to the Jewish Family Services Food Bank. Through this garden, we are connected with nature, with the source of food, with friends, with our tradition, and with wonder itself.

This experience of wonder, said the great 20th century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, is the very gate through which we being to have an intimation of the divine.

When I stand in the garden and look at all that it means, I feel in my heart the beautiful expression of wonder and awe: “Ma gadlu ma’asecah, YA, me’od amku machshevotecha!” “How great are your deeds, oh Holy One of being. How very deep are your thoughts!”

I’m going to pause here for a moment and give you a brief road map through the rest of my remarks. A d’var Torah is meant to teach about some aspect of the weekly Torah Portion. I’ve started in Beth Shalom’s garden. Now I need to make my way back, as it were, to this week’s parsha.

Parshat Pinchas contains many themes, but I am going to focus today on the concluding section, which recapitulates the **gifts** the ordinary Israelites were required to provide to God at the Tabernacle, once they entered the land. Chapter 28 opens: “Vayomer Adonai el Moshe lemor: Tzav et b’nai Israel, v’amarta alehem: et korboni, lachmi, l’ishi raiha nichoti, tishmaru l’hakriv li b’moado. “ “The Lord spoke to Moses and said: command the Children of Israel, and say to them: my drawing near offerings, my food, my fire-offering of tranquilizing aroma, you will be careful to present to me at its appointed time.” (Numbers 28:1) The parsha goes on to list in detail the korbanot - the sacrificial offerings required for each of the sacred occasions throughout the year.

Within our modern world view, we may sometimes treat references to sacrifices within our texts and our liturgy as anachronistic. I would like to try to make the case that there is something profound to be learned from them, and that they are deeply relevant to what draws us together here today. We’ll start, but not end, with the observation that our Shabbat worship service is our modern offering to God that stands in place of the ritual sacrifice that was practiced in the Temple long ago. Indeed when we recite the Shabbat sacrifice as part of our liturgy today, we will be reading from today’s parsha.

However I want to focus on this idea that what God is asking for in this passuk is precisely - a **gift** from us. Jacob Milgrom, one of the foremost scholars of the sacrificial system, argues that the word “ishai,” which is often translated as “fire offering” actually refers to gifts, not fire at all. He makes the case based on how the word is used elsewhere in Torah, that it simply cannot mean “offerings by fire,” since some burnt offerings are referred to as specifically not “ishei,” whereas “ishei” sometimes refers to offerings that are not burned. So let’s say then that these particular sacrifices, then, are to be regarded as **gifts** - our gifts to God.

Heschel insists that it is through the pathway of wonder that one becomes open to experiencing existence as a gift, and thus open to an intimation of the Giver. For Heschel, wonder is “not a state of esthetic enjoyment.” Rather it is the sense that we are “being asked the ultimate question…. In spite of our pride, in spite of our acquisitiveness, we are driven by an awareness that something is **asked** of us,” and that **this question** “demands our whole **being** as an answer.” Our very sense of indebtedness draws us toward this question - how am I to respond to this **gift** that I have been given? **What is being asked of me?**

The American scholar and cultural critic Lewis Hyde wrote a beautiful book entitled, *The Gift*. This book is a small masterpiece of insight into an approach to life that fully embraces the indebtedness one feels toward the source of the mysterious abundance that manifests both in nature and in the realm of human imagination. In it he says:

Just as treating nature’s bounty as a gift ensures the fertility of nature, so to treat the products of the imagination as gifts ensures the fertility of the imagination. What we receive from nature or from the imagination comes to us from **beyond our sphere of influence**, and the lesson of aboriginal first-fruits rituals seems to be that the continued fertility of these things depends on their remaining “beyond us,” on their not being drawn into the smaller ego. “All that opens the womb is mine,” says the Lord. First-fruits rituals protect the spirit of the gift by making evident the true structure of our relationship to the sources of our wealth. The salmon are not subject to the will of the Indians; the imagination is not subject to the will of the artist. To accept the fruits of these things as gifts is to acknowledge that we are not their owners or masters, that we are, if anything, their servants, their ministers.

To say the same thing in a slightly different fashion, the first-fruits ritual lays down a simple injunction in regard to fertility: **Do not exploit the essence**. The bones of the salmon, the fat of the lamb, …, are directed back toward their homeland, and by that return the beneficiaries of these gifts avoid what we normally mean by exploitation. The **return gift** is, then, **the fertilizer that assures the fertility of the source**. (p 192)

Hyde makes a connection between first fruits rituals - which are strong in many religions including ours, and which I would like to expand out to include our sacrificial system more broadly - and his perception that the source of blessing, both material and creative, is wrapped in mystery which is beyond human control and influence. Both Hyde and Heschel, then, are embracing **humility**; both refrain from seizing ownership - from drawing the gifts perceived by our wondering and appreciative souls into what Hyde calls “the smaller ego,” where we may feel the license to exploit them, thereby bringing an end to their fertility. In offering the return gift, then, we arouse in ourselves a humility which resists the urge to exploit.

Our attitude itself is enough to affect this shift. The human being’s religious imagination, which allows us to experience the world we inhabit as existing within the framework of a story told by God, is a profound force at work within the world. In other language (Jon Mooallem) “Our imagination has become an ecological force.” If we believe at the deepest level that there is truth in our stories, in our Torah, then consider that this story is found in its center. The repeated activity of manifesting this humility can be our shield against the urge to exploit the essence.

For me Hyde’s beautiful language adds a layer of rich commentary to the manifold of ritual that is woven throughout Torah which teaches us how we are to stand in relationship to God specifically in God’s role as bestower of Divine blessings from the Earth itself; how we are to stand in relationship with the Earth and the life and abundance that bloom from it, when we perceive it precisely as a gift - indeed as the open hand of God, as in “Pote’ach Et Yadecha U’Masbia Le’Chol Chai Ratzon” - “Open Your hand, your favor sustains all that lives.” (Psalm 145)

How does Torah teach us to respond to this gift?

One simple law exemplifies this:

If a bird’s nest happens to be before you on the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, and the mother is sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall send the mother away free, but the young you may take for yourself.

Wendell Berry calls this passuk “a perfect paradigm of ecological and agricultural discipline… The inflexible rule is that the source must be preserved. You may take the young, but you must save the breeding stock. You may eat the harvest, but you must save the seed, and you must preserve the fertility of your fields.”

While it may seem that the purpose of the sacrificial offerings found in our parsha is to invoke some sort of magical ritual that will force or cajole the holy one to serve human ends, I suggest, rather, that they are intended as a way for human beings to participate in the mystery of relationship with the Divine source of being.

The Hebrew word most often translated as “sacrifice” is korban. This word is formed from the root kuf resh bet, which is the root for hitkar’vut, which means “drawing near.” The sense of the meaning of this word is found (for me) in the morning prayer, which says, “My Lord, the soul you have given me is pure; you guard it within me, b’kirbi.” To be as near to God as our soul is within us; this is the closeness that Israel strives to attain through the korbanot.

God asks for these korbanot in our parsha not because God requires sustenance, but because God desires our devotion and **fellowship** (according to Baruch Levine, a foremost scholar of Leviticus).

Let me close by briefly describing one particular korban: the Zefach Shlamim - the sacred gift of greeting. This gift perfectly illustrates the potential of the sacrifice to be understood as a **sacred meal**, of human beings in fellowship with God. Certain fatty portions of the animal were burnt completely on the altar as an “olah,” the burnt offering, which ascended and provided a pleasing odor to the Lord. The purpose of the “olah” is precisely, according to Levine, to attract the attention of God - essentially the olah is an “invitation” to God to partake in a shared meal. The Zevach afforded worshipers the experience of joining together with the priests in a sacred meal at which God Himself was the honored guest. The Zevach Shlamim was a free will offering - it was not for the purpose of purification or expiating sin. It was just a gift, to be brought and offered from the heart, and eaten anywhere in Jerusalem. The Todah offering, in contrast, was a gesture of gratitude such as a person might give after recovering from a serious illness. In most ways it was like the Shalamim, except that it could **not** be eaten over two days - it needed to be eaten **in one day**. Why? Could it be because this necessitated assembling an even larger crowd to share the meal with, and maybe even inviting strangers? The company would be sure to ask “what happened to you, why are you making a Todah offering?” to which the offerer would respond by blessing God for restoring his health, thus bringing about the mitzvah of blessing God in public.

May it be that our grateful acceptance of the gift that we receive from the outstretched hand of God, so palpable when we stand in Gan Shalom in mid-summer, will lead us to ask: how can we restore and enhance the fertility of this beautiful place, our Earth, honoring the inheritance we have received, so that we may pass it on to future generations even more abundant than when we received it?

And when we are asked to recall the deeply visceral, physical, and indeed bloody, smoky, and noisy sacrifices described in our parsha, may it be that we feel the need to open ourselves to the Gift of Creation itself, to stand humbly before it; not attempting to capture it for our exploitative use, but rather offering a return gift - the fertilizer which assures the fertility of the source? while also welcoming the Divine Creator to be our honored guest at the celebratory meal that we will share together when our prayers of invocation are complete.

Shabbat Shalom!