



Sleeping in the Dust at Burning Man

BY RON H. FELDMAN

THE TALMUD SAYS, “Three things are a foretaste of the world-that-is-coming: Sabbath, sunshine, and sexual intercourse” (Talmud Berakhot 57b). In various ways, all three of these tastes of the messianic era are to be had at Burning Man, the weeklong festival that takes place in late August near Reno, Nevada.

First is the sunshine. There is lots of it on “the playa,” an ancient Black Rock Desert lakebed that is a flat and lifeless alkali expanse prone to severe dust storms. This is the site to which over 50,000 people bring all they need to temporarily construct Black Rock City, which annually appears and disappears like a desert mirage. It is simultaneously an arts festival, a performance festival, and a music and dance party where participation and immediacy of experience are valued, and various combinations of costuming and nudity are common.

According to the Burning Man Organization, the festival is an experimental community that “challenges its members to express themselves and rely on themselves to a degree that is not normally encountered in one’s day-to-day life.” There is an almost

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“Burning Man provides a version of the messianic ‘world-that-is-coming,’ expressing deep resonance with themes of Jewish tradition,” Feldman writes. Here, participants gather at Sukkat Shalom, one of many camps within Burning Man’s temporarily constructed city.



A man prays beside a loaf of challah at Burning Man. “The challah we fresh-baked on the playa for 300 souls who joined us for Sabbath eve tasted slightly of dust but was, even more than usual, ‘a taste of the world-that-is-coming,’” the author writes.

complete prohibition of commerce (you can only buy ice and coffee), including a prohibition of corporate sponsorships of projects (i.e., no branded gifts, no commercial logos). Participation, self-reliance, de commodification, and the gift economy are key. This is not a Club Med all-inclusive, or a music festival that is all about the headline acts, with the ticket holders mere interchangeable and passive consumers. Rather, the organizers create only the infrastructure for the participants who give each other their art, performances, and presence, thereby *making* the event.

Like Fenton Johnson, whose essay “Burning Man, Desire, and the Culture of Empire” in *Tikkun’s* Summer 2012 issue prompted these reflections, I first attended Burning Man in 2010. Unlike Johnson, who ultimately rejects Burning Man for being insufficiently critical of “transnational corporate rule or wars of aggression” and being another expression of “the abso-

lute need of white men to impose our will on every landscape,” I have found myself drawn back each year since. I think Johnson’s rejection is too simplistic, overlooking ways in which Burning Man encourages a sustained critique of what “burners” call “the default world.” Nevertheless, his thoughts about the festival’s emphasis on immediate experience and how this expresses a yearning “for union, for communion with what many would label God” got me thinking about my strange attraction to the festival, especially since my experience has little to do with the stereotype of it being “a party with sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll in the desert” (*Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2010).

The view I’ve come to is that Burning Man provides a version of the messianic “world-that-is-coming,” expressing deep resonances with themes of Jewish tradition and Western culture as a whole. To be clear, I am *not* saying that Burning Man has explicitly religious elements. Rather, I’m suggesting that we see a shared human impetus for ritualized gatherings relating to the desire for freedom and transformation, and that certain practices have evolved at Burning Man that are surprisingly similar to ancient Jewish observances concerning Sabbath and festivals that articulate and arouse a yearning for a better world.

A Dusty Garden of Eden

The volunteers who briefly orient new arrivals to Burning Man greet them with the phrase “Welcome Home.” By the time we’ve gotten there we’re pretty exhausted after spending many hours driving and waiting in line, and these volunteers might seem annoyingly like Wal-Mart greeters—but then we realize that their costumes are *not* blue Wal-Mart vests, and the simultaneous sarcasm, irony, and hopefulness of “Welcome Home” tells us “we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Exhaustion transforms into exhilaration as we arrive at a dusty playa dressed up as a postmodern American version of the Garden of Eden. Illuminated with bright sun by day and bright lights and fire by night, this is a through-the-looking-glass inversion of Las Vegas, that other Nevada version of paradise.

Really? Black Rock City as the Garden of Eden?

Western messianism and utopianism have usually seen the idyllic future as a return to a mythic Garden of Eden. Many elements—from the suspension of commerce, to the gift economy, to the pervasive (though far from universal) nakedness—engage the myth of Adam and Eve and the innocent plentitude of Eden.

But the physical playa seems to be the very antithesis of a garden. It is a hot, dry place of dust where nothing grows, where we carry dust masks and goggles at all times in case a whiteout quickly engulfs us, where there is no escape from this one basic element. Yet, this is also a profound reminder that we are but dust: the view of modern cosmology that we are all made of stardust is very much in accord with the biblical myth that God

formed Adam from the “dust of the earth,” and expelled Adam and Eve from Eden with the curse, “for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” For this week we become one with the dust, which becomes a marker of our presence and participation, a reminder that we are not awaiting a transformation but are living the transformation. The creation of this separate reality in time and place heightens the experience of being alive and awakens the desire for a better world, precisely because we are temporarily taken out of our usual routines and surroundings.

A Time to Embrace: Pilgrimage Festivals, Ancient and Postmodern

Since antiquity, festivals have been a time for gathering, partying, and sexual encounters.

The Talmud tells us joyously of specific holidays when young women invited young men into the fields for the purpose of coupling up:

Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel said: there never were in Israel greater days of joy than the Fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement. On these days the young women of Jerusalem used to go out in white garments ... and dance in the vineyards. What would they say? “Young man, lift up your eyes and see, what do you choose for yourself? Do not set your eyes toward beauty, set your eyes toward family.” (Ta’anit 26b)

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem (i.e., before 70 CE), the annual fall harvest festival of Sukkot was the main festival of the year—simply called “The Holiday.” Still practiced by Jews today, it follows Burning Man by a few weeks, and while dwelling in the sukkah (booth), I’ve been noticing fascinating parallels. In many ways, Burning Man is a postmodern Sukkot.

During the eight days of Sukkot, the Israelites were commanded to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, live temporarily in booths made of vegetation, and make sacrifices at the Temple—that is, bring a lot of food, offer the best of it to God, and then eat the leftovers. Booths were used throughout the Ancient Near East as temporary shelters built in fields while harvesting, and Sukkot resembles harvest festivals celebrated throughout the region during which a lot of wine was consumed and fertility rituals—i.e., sacred sex—took place. As Ecclesiastes (the biblical scroll read during Sukkot) observes with clear sexual innuendo, there is “a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing” (Eccl. 3:5).

The Talmud (Tractate Sukkah) tells us that a major element of Sukkot was a ritual in which water was drawn from the spring and poured on the altar. This was accompanied by a festival that lasted all night, including giant torches that illuminated all of Jerusalem, juggling (of torches, knives, eggs, and glasses of wine), music, singing, and dancing. The Talmud says that participants did not sleep and that whoever “has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the Water Drawing has not seen rejoicing in his life.” As Ecclesiastes recommends, “There is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means” (Eccl. 2:24).

This sounds a lot like Burning Man, with its 24/7 music and dancing, performances, and free-flowing alcohol (not to mention drugs, which perform a similar function of shifting consciousness). But while it may seem like partying is the main thing, in both cases this is only on the surface; at a deeper level, the celebrations directly confront the transitory, temporary, evanescent essence of life. The opening line of Ecclesiastes speaks to this: “All is vanity.” I have come to realize this does not mean life is pointless, but that life is transitory: “All is ephemeral.”

This message is made real by the experience of living in a temporary dwelling, which is the major commandment of Sukkot and an essential element of Burning Man. According to the Bible, the Israelites lived in similar booths during their forty years wandering in the desert, and Sukkot reminds us of that liminal space and time between slavery



Burning Man concludes with the silent burning of the Temple (top), a sacred site where people leave notes in memory of deceased loved ones (middle). The solemnity of the Temple contrasts with the edgy playfulness of camps such as Baal-Mart (bottom).



Money hangs from the branches of the *Transformoney Tree* at Burning Man. Created by Amsterdam-based artist Dadara, this art installation invited passers-by to glue bills to the tree, thereby erasing their financial value.

and freedom. In both cases it takes a huge effort to plan, build, and decorate the sukkah or theme camp. Some burners spend much of their year preparing an art, food, or performance project for one week of glory. The process of preparing and packing heightens one's awareness of what is really necessary for survival, what can be left behind, and the waste one generates (which must be packed out). Living outside is physically challenging, especially on the playa with the sun, heat, and inescapable dust. Like the Israelites, you are clearly *not* living at home; instead, your whole body enters a liminal space, re-enacting the story of the desert wandering that provided a first taste of freedom.

Transience is also the deep message of Burning Man's gift economy, which evokes echoes of the ancient practice of "sacrifice"—that is, you produce your best stuff, and then give it up. In the Ancient Near East, the best of the best was given to various gods by burning it on the altar. The smoke rises up to reach the divine realm in the high heavens. (While God doesn't eat much human food, the Bible does say that God likes the pleasing fragrance of barbecue and incense.) Similarly, at Burning Man, many—perhaps most—of the art installations are burned, surrendered in recognition of the fact that they were never really ours to keep. This simultaneously subverts the dominant culture of accumulation and, by satiric exaggeration, critiques the disposability of consumer culture. Savor it, don't save it.

The conclusion of the weeklong festivities is also similar, ending on a somber note that reminds us of life's passage. Sukkot ends with *Shemini Atzeret* (Eighth-Day Pause), a day of recovery from the previous week's activities, where Jewish tradition places one of the observances of *Yizkor* (remembrance), a time for recalling dead relatives. Similarly, Burning Man concludes on the night after the raucous partying that accompanies burning the "Man" (a large stylized statue) with the silent burning of the Temple, a non-sectarian sacred site where people leave notes in memory of friends and loved ones who have passed on. As Ecclesiastes observed, "There is a time to be born and a time to die" (Eccl. 3:2). The cycle is complete and the festival ends, to be resumed again next year in this season.

You Shall Do No Work: The Sabbath and Decommodification

While the pilgrimage and party may echo an ancient biblical pattern, it is one of Burning Man's "Ten Principles" (a clearly biblical reference—not nine and not eleven) that seems crucial to its uniqueness among contemporary music and arts festivals: decommodification, which aims to "create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience." In addition, there are strict limitations on vehicular traffic (except for participants trying to get to their campsites, or for art cars); for the most part, it is a city of bicycles and pedestrians. The remote location also means that cell phones don't work, which is almost universally seen as a plus.

The Ten Principles delineate commonly held values that reflect "the community's ethos and culture" (included in the "Survival Guide" at survival.burningman.com). Of course, none of the principles are followed in full or consistently by either the organizers

or participants, but one can say the same about the biblical Ten Commandments. They are aspirational, and the Burning Man community is constantly debating (in an almost talmudic fashion, I'm tempted to say) the gap between theory and practice. Even if imperfectly executed, de commodification results in a self-consciously created respite from the constant drumbeat of commercial culture, from work, and from living in an ever accelerating market-driven society. People do not greet each other by asking, "What do you do?" (meaning "What work do you do?"). What one does in "the default world" is hardly discussed. Instead, people ask: "Where are you camping? Who are you camping with? What is your project?" This all contributes to a focus on participation, community, art, and shared immediacy of experience. Sensitivity to synchronicities is heightened in this ritualistic and artistic environment, and planning begins to give way to an acceptance of whatever happens in the present moment. While rather different from a silent retreat, the festival produces a similar shift in consciousness from doing to being.

It seems that the Burning Man organizers have stumbled upon a framework of rules that surprisingly echo some of the key rules of Jewish Sabbath observance (and other Jewish festivals), although the periodicity (weekly vs. annual) is different. The daily activities of commerce, work, and politics are suspended on the Sabbath, including refraining from the use of vehicles and electronics. In Hebrew, the word for sacred is *kadosh*, which at root means "separate." The Sabbath rules conspire to create a separate pocket of time and space that facilitates the emergence of an alternate reality, a manifestation of how the world could or should be, rather than how it is.

The Sabbath is not natural, but socially constructed; as the various versions of the biblical commandments put it, humans "make" the Sabbath by "remembering" to "observe" it. The Sabbath is prepared for and anticipated: one invests in it, prepares especially good food, wears nicer clothes, and invites guests to share meals and socialize, while also sharing prayers of gratitude and studying. The Sabbath is an alternate way of being that is special and better, so much so that it provides "a foretaste of the world-that-is-coming." Traditionally, one yearns for the Sabbath so much that it becomes the destination of the week, with life lived from Sabbath to Sabbath. On the Sabbath, one's weekday "work" is not what matters, and is not much discussed; there is a shift from doing to being.

Of course, the Sabbath depends on the work of the week and could not exist without it; Judaism recognizes this dialectic of interdependence between sacred and mundane. Similarly, nobody at Burning Man is under the illusion that it is autonomously sustainable or divorced from the "default" world off-playa—everyone is well aware of the preparation that must be done beforehand, and the cleanup that follows. In a phenomenological parallel to living life from Sabbath to Sabbath, some burners live their year from playa to playa—a location in both time and space—preparing, creating, anticipating.

At Burning Man these rules encourage a pervasive attitude of irony, self-awareness, and cultural critique that is more humorous than angry. People are encouraged to cover up or transform corporate logos on their vehicles or other equipment. Within the variety of camps and art projects are those with more explicitly political messages. One prominent camp has a huge sign declaring itself as "Mal-Mart," a literal inversion of the "W" in Wal-Mart, although this was changed in 2012 to "Baal-Mart," a nice biblical reference to the false god, Baal, who was repeatedly worshipped by the Israelites when they strayed from the true God.

Also in 2012, *Burn Wall Street* was a major art installation in which *Chaos Manhattan Bank*, *The Bank of Unamerica*, and *Goldman Sucks* were burned to the ground, while the *Transformoney Tree* invited participants to glue currency to the artificial tree, thereby erasing its financial value and highlighting the consensual dream that creates the financial world. There are a number of playa publications, most of which are full of critique, humor, and irony. Many refer to the Burning Man Organization as the "BMorg," obviously a reference to *Star Trek's* anti-human Borg.

Substituting a gift economy for a market economy makes Burning Man into a giant potlatch, where one gains status by sharing more and better food, schwag, art, or experiences. However, unlike at the Native American potlatch, at Burning Man it's not just the wealthiest who are expected to give. To the contrary, it is all about "radical participation" where everyone contributes to making the event. "Radical self-reliance" is not merely a survivalist focus on food, water, and shelter, but also about encouraging shared creativity. This happens through art projects, both fixed and mobile (art cars), and theme camps with various activities and classes, from raves to yoga. Much of this manifests as individual performance and self-representation in the form of alternate "playa names" and much costuming (i.e., not "default world" clothes), all of which can result in a very intimate and powerful experience, even if it is only "on the playa." Of course, many of these experiments fall short in some way, but when everyone is a maker as well as a consumer, society and culture are radically shifted. The suspension of commerce and consumerism is no small feat, and is probably *the* critical element facilitating an experience that hints at the possibility of a different and better world, thereby arousing a messianic yearning for personal and political transformation.

Arousing Messianic Yearning

One of the lines in the daily Jewish prayers composed many centuries ago praises God for "Nourishing life with kindness . . . maintaining faith with those who sleep in the dust." For the ancient rabbis, this was an affirmation of faith in a messianic future when the dead would be resurrected. A condensed version of this—"Nourish faith in those who sleep in the dust"—was the sign welcoming visitors to Sukkat Shalom in 2010, the camp I joined in 2011 and 2012. That sign caused me to laugh out loud at the humor and irony so in keeping with the spirit of Burning Man. While the rabbinic liturgy is metaphorical, our experience on the playa is one of literally "sleeping in the dust." In this place the rabbis' affirmation has a completely new meaning: that God is with us as we *live* in the dust. This inversion, which shifts the focus from the dead to the living, does not negate but rather invigorates the traditional messianic assertion by alerting us to the possibility that God is in *this* place, and that we can "bring the messiah" right here and now. The challah we fresh-baked on the playa for 300 souls who joined us for Sabbath eve tasted slightly of dust but was, even more than usual, "a taste of the world-that-is-coming."

Of course, it is a failed attempt; in the end we too must leave, exiles from Eden. The pleasures of the playa meet the miserable traffic jam of the ironically named "Exodus," when we wait in line for hours to get on the road, not toward the "promised land" but the "default world" of work, commerce, traffic, cell phones, and politics. It is time to recover from a physical experience of sensory overload, not to enjoy the mindfulness following a silent retreat or the relaxation after being pampered for a week at Club Med.

The dust—a talisman—lingers, as do the memories. More than a party in the desert, the week of art and play awakens a consciousness of, and a yearning for, a different and better world. Burning Man has been criticized on many counts, and it is far from perfect. Yet, even if the yearning is incompletely fulfilled, it is still aroused. Most of us return not as revolutionaries at the barricades, but social change agents sprinkled around the world. A framework that catalyzes a personal encounter with this yearning for a better world, whether fulfilled or frustrated, is itself rare and is a first step toward change. ■