

Spirit and Story Archive

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Where Is The 'Burning Man' Fire in Jewish Life?

By Robert Rabinowitz

It was not until I was sitting on the plane returning to New York that I truly realized what an extraordinary experience Burning Man was. For four days, Black Rock City, the site of the annual Burning Man festival, had been reality for my wife Juliette and me, along with its giant art installations, surreal vehicles and wildly imaginative tents.

Black Rock City is a seven square mile “civic organism” constructed on the barren, dusty bed of an ancient lake in the Nevada desert. It has its own DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles), an airstrip, daily newspapers, and several radio stations. Its town ordinances are quite simple: Bring all your own food, water and shelter. Leave no garbage. Use no money. Allow no opportunity for corporate sponsorship. And, most importantly, participate without reluctance in your very own form of “radical self-expression.”

The festival culminates on Saturday night with the ritual burning of the giant wooden statue at its heart, the Man, along with many of the other installations and art works that adorn Black Rock City. It was only when we had put some distance between us and it that its bizarre and unreal quality really hit us. Reflecting on Burning Man, however, I discerned that some of its major themes find echoes in the Jewish calendar.

Pilgrimage (Aliyat Haregel)

Black Rock City is built in a horseshoe round an empty plain half a mile in diameter, the playa. This is populated by close to 100 art installations, including giant renditions of human body parts (this year's theme was the body); a bewildering maze with different tactile zones; a giant rib cage in which one could swing, imitating the rhythms of the heart; a giant three-faced sculpture that wept tears of fire; a platform that shot powerful beams of light toward the stars, creating a literal “pillar of fire” in the night; and a cluster of many brightly colored flags that flickered and snapped in the incessant desert wind. At the center of the playa is the Man, a four story wooden statue standing atop a pyramid of hay bales and lit with neon strips of blue and red.

The central unifying moment of Burning Man takes place on Saturday night when the Man is torched. From late Saturday afternoon, Black Rock City becomes relatively quiet as people go to their tents to doze or to prepare food. At nine o'clock the Man, who was visible from all parts of the camp, raised his neon arms -- a signal that the burn was due to commence. Then a shout went up and we all looked around. The Man was burning. Cursing the tardiness of our camp mates, I rushed towards the Man, joining the converging streams of thousands of people heading toward him. Around the fire were swirling crowds of onlookers, dancers, fire jugglers. As we got closer to the flames, the atmosphere became more and more intense. People threw their art works into the fire while a man chanted through a bull horn: "You are not your job....You are not your stock options....You are not a product...." One man wearing a fire fighter's suit, part of the team supposed to be protecting us from burning debris, began to dance in uncoordinated ecstasy. Chains of people, hands joined, weaved in and out of the crowds. Naked people bathed in the intense heat of the flames.

The burn is the heart of Burning Man, its spatial location echoing its spiritual centrality. It is what connects such a huge and diverse crowd. This year 26,000 people from across North America and around the world attended, all snaking into Black Rock City in a long line of RVs, U-hauls and cars, many decorated in surreal fashion. I'm not quite sure what the burn means, but most of the people with whom I spoke saw it as signifying human transience, being in the present moment, living life for its own sake, escaping from the constraints of a corporatized society. Like many powerful symbols, the burn's meaning is not fixed. Nor can it be exhausted by any explanation. Nevertheless, the burn is what brings everyone together, creating the commonality and trust that allow for the invigorating encounters and experiences of the festival. Standing at the burn and looking around at the diverse people present, I was led to think of the celebratory atmosphere of ancient Jerusalem when, three times a year, everybody turned up with their food, drink and gifts, and pitched their tents, ready for the big burn.

Purim

The central theme of Purim is *ad-d'la-yada* (literally, "until one does not know"—on Purim one should become so intoxicated that one no longer knows the difference between "Praise Mordechai!" and "Curse Haman!"). On Purim, we blur the boundaries between good and bad, high and low, master and servant. The Megillah, with its sudden and comic reversals of fortune, shows us a world turned upside down. Purim is a Jewish version of the same theme expressed in *carnevale*, the traditional European season of merriment, in which existing social structures are either temporarily obliterated or turned upside down. Burning Man has a Purim "energy" about it. It is dedicated to creating a space in which people can be the person their everyday surroundings won't let them be or be the person they fantasize about being, without fear of judgment or reproach.

Next to our camp of seven or eight private tents, a large central parachute tent and an RV, Doug had parked his car and erected a small tent. We invited him to eat with us on our first night together. He was dressed conventionally enough in his jeans, sneakers and a rain jacket. The next morning we awoke to find a different Doug greeting the dawn dressed in a bright pink frock. What brought Doug to Burning Man was the freedom from usual judgments about what is permissible or in good taste. This also accounted for the attendance of the man I saw on the first day dragging a bed of nails behind him attached to his back by two large bolts screwed into his flesh, the people running around naked all covered in body paint, the

sexual exhibitionists, and the folk dressed in outlandish “Mad Max” gear or oriental clothing. As with Purim and carnevale, the point is not to overturn conventions completely, but to provide a temporary escape from them -- to create a safety valve that allows pressure that has built up underneath restrictive social customs to be released so that life can return to normal.

Shabbat

Keeping Shabbat at Burning Man was easy but strange. The very nature of the event means that one can participate reasonably fully without doing anything that contravenes the fairly Orthodox standards to which Juliette and I adhere. The three most salient prohibitions of our Shabbat are against use of money, vehicular travel and use of electricity. Among the few rules of Burning Man (promulgated with profuse apologies from the anarchically inclined neo-hippie organizers) are an absolute ban on commercial activity (overlooked, it seems, only for the purchase of illegal substances). Specifically, there is no purchasing of art works or the various services offered around Black Rock City, such as massages, hair washes or food. Instead, one brings items such as candy, beads, pictures for “barter” or “trade,” although they feel rather like a gift that one would bring as a guest invited out for dinner. Likewise, although Burning Man has gotten big enough so that a bicycle is a great help, one can easily get around on foot. Finally, there is much less need for the use of electrical goods than in normal surroundings. Indeed, even on a weekday one could easily manage without using electricity with the exception of using a flashlight to poke around the murky depths of one’s tent or car trunk.

The fact that we were already for all intents and purposes keeping Shabbat on the other days that we spent at Burning Man left us with a slight feeling of dissatisfaction. Faced with the question of whether we should ride bicycles round Black Rock City on Shabbat, we decided not to do so, more as a way of marking Shabbat as different rather than from any strongly felt halakhic perspective.

A.J. Heschel describes Shabbat as “a temple in time” – a sanctuary from human dominance of the world. Burning Man is both a temporal and spatial sanctuary with its distaste for the corporate world which, in its latest dot.com incarnation, is intent on “monetizing” as many aspects of the new social relations that have emerged on the Internet as possible. Another feature of Burning Man that adds to its Shabbat feel is its combination of simplicity and abundance. One does not need much “stuff” out in the desert and, this being America, everybody brings far more food and gifts than they can actually use. All of this adds up to an atmosphere of sharing and giving in which money becomes irrelevant, for, like the world-to-come of which Shabbat is just a taste, there is more than enough for everybody.

Creativity and Self-Expression

There are, however, two interconnected themes from Burning Man that I could not find marked on the Jewish calendar: creativity and self-expression. Burning Man touts itself as a festival of “radical self-expression.” A large element of this self-expression is achieved through art, whether through production of art works or through performance. It seems to me that this element of human nature, the urge to engage in aesthetic self-expression, is not addressed within the traditional Jewish framework. I am not sure of the reason for this, but it leaves me wondering: Is this something that needs to be brought inside of Judaism (whatever we mean by that)? And, if so, how?

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