

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A New Dayeinu

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“Dayeinu,” composed by Cantor Gerald Cohen

from the Passover Cantata *V'higad'ta L'vincha* (And you shall tell your child)

Performed by the Syracuse Children's Choir, Barbara Tagg, conductor

As we progress through the cycle of Torah readings, we come to associate certain stories with a particular time of year: the creation story in early fall, Joseph and his brothers later in that season, the revolt of Korah in the summer. The story of this week's Torah reading, however, has a double life in the course of the year: we associate it with the winter when we read the parashah in the cycle, but it also becomes the focus of our spring Pesah celebration in a few months. In the Torah, the Israelites celebrate their deliverance by singing *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea, their grand poem of thanks for liberation. Of course, Judaism has since then built up an extensive liturgy related to the liberation from Egypt, most centrally found in the Hagaddah, our family and community liturgy for Pesah.

When the Syracuse Children's Choir commissioned me to compose a piece for them, I decided to write a piece based on selections from the Haggadah, focusing on the themes of passing the story from one generation to the children of the next generation, and on our gratitude for deliverance from slavery. “Dayeinu” was an obvious choice for one of the movements, as it summarizes the entire expanse of the Exodus story from the outlook of giving thanks: “Dayeinu—it would have been enough for us.” It is often a challenge, but ultimately a delight, to give gratitude for all the blessings we receive, no matter how large or small. This version of *Dayeinu* selects key verses to create a joyous dance of thanks and celebration. “Dayeinu” will also be performed by HaZamir: The International Jewish High School Choir at Carnegie Hall on Sunday, April 3, 2016.

May we have gratitude, in the spirit of Dayeinu, as we read the parashah this week and when we sit at the seder in April.

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Parashat Beshallah 5776

פרשת בשלח תשע"ו



What Next? A Free People Finds Its Way

Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

From the air *Eretz Mitzrayim*, “the narrow land” of Egypt, reveals itself as a vast expanse of sand and stone broken only by the twisting dark line of the Nile. I saw this first hand as a student in 1985, but you can look as well through satellite photos. On either side of the great river, a thin strip of green extends for a few kilometers to the east and west. The Nile looks like a mighty green cobra whose tail points at the first cataract near Sudan, and whose broad triangular head is the delta fanning out to strike the Mediterranean Sea.

The splitting of the sea, *bekiat Yam Suf*, is a mirror image of *Mitzrayim*. Instead of a vast expanse of desert with a river running through it, a vast expanse of water with a pathway of land magically leads from one side to the other, *me'avdut l'heirut*, from slavery to freedom. The split sea is an instant inversion of Israel's captivity in Egypt; the passage is a reversal of fortune and a moment of national rebirth.

The splitting of the sea is certainly dramatic and worthy of its famous song. But the thrill quickly passes, yielding to the terrifying solitude of the desert. In the growing swell of murmurs, the essential questions bubble up. They come out as complaints—what will we eat or drink? Are we going to die here? Why did we ever leave Egypt? Behind these complaints lies the greatest question of the Torah—what follows freedom? How do we survive? Now that we are free, what purpose will we find in life beyond mere survival? Thousands of years later, these remain the core questions of Jewish identity.

Exodus 16 offers two responses to the challenge of freedom. According to Professor Stephen Geller, one response can be called “covenantal” and the other “cultic” (“Manna and Sabbath: A Literary-Theological Reading of Exodus 16,” *Interpretation* (Jan. 2005, 59/1)).

The covenantal tradition in our portion is concerned with the *testing* of Israel. God wants to know whether these people are worthy heirs of the ancestors, and

whether they can be entrusted with the Torah and the Promised Land. Early indications are not good. These people, including Moses, are always second-guessing God. As such, the story of the manna and of Shabbat is about God testing Israel to see if they will finally obey Adonai. We read:

If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in God's sight, giving ear to God's commandments and keeping all of God's laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer. (Ex. 15:26)

The covenantal version of the manna story can be understood in this regard as a course of obedience training. Israel's food supply is tightly regulated by God—they are allowed a one day supply; any attempts to hoard for tomorrow turn rancid and wormy. On Shabbat, the rule is reversed—now they have to collect a two-day supply, and any attempts to gather on Shabbat are viewed as disobedience. First they must work, then they must rest, precisely as instructed.

According to this narrative, the developmental task of the desert generation is to mark the transition from being servants of Pharaoh to becoming servants of the LORD. The point of Shabbat is to test Israel's acceptance of divine sovereignty, and to trust in God's beneficence.

This theme becomes an important aspect of Jewish spirituality throughout the ages. Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Luntshitz (16th century) writes, "One who has bread in his basket and still asks "what will I eat tomorrow" is of little faith, and so the people who desist from going to gather food on Shabbat demonstrate trust that what they collected yesterday will suffice. And if so, then they can follow God's teachings, for whoever is not whole in trust will spend all of his days pursuing wealth, and when will he turn to focus on God and the Torah?"

Shabbat then is about obedience, but perhaps also about asserting confidence in God and liberating oneself to pursue spiritual goals in addition to material ones. While obedience is not a popular mode of religious expression in our day, there is still a form of liberty that emerges from the acceptance of the command to stop gathering and rest.

However, there is another, cultic mode of spirituality evident in the Manna narrative. In this thread, the gift of daily bread and the ritual of Sabbath rest is a human reenactment of the divine drama of creation. In our portion, the daily bread is doubled on Friday, just as, in Genesis 1, the sixth day is doubly blessed and called "*tov me'od*".

The weekly ritual of stopping in our gathering of food is a human counterpart to the divine pause in creation. Geller says that the seventh day pause from labor is a way of demarcating the prior labors to bless them. The collection of manna is an act of *partnership* between God and Israel, and so too is the cessation of collection on Shabbat. Shabbat is a "*brit*" and an "*ot*," a sign of *partnership* between God and Israel, as we read later in Exodus 31:

It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested from work and was refreshed. (31:17)

The significance of this version of the manna story is that Israel is being cultivated as God's partner in creation. The point becomes not so much about obedience as it is about parallelism between human and divine creativity.

So, we have two manna traditions. The testing mode teaches Israel that it must accept limits on its autonomy in order to make sense of freedom. Without such limits life will be a ceaseless search for food and wealth. The command not to collect too much, and sometimes to stop collecting altogether reminds us to curb our anxious accumulation of resources and to live together with God.

The innovation of the cultic tradition is to dignify the human offering. We recreate the universe each week when we work and when we stop working. Israel is given the chance to partner with God in recreating the world. Having accepted limits we now can name new goals and fashion the world according to our highest values.

Exiting the land of narrowness, where an entire population clusters around the riverbanks, and passing through the narrow path in the sea, Israel enters the broad expanse of the desert. They are free but fearful, uncertain of their purpose and protection. The ramified narratives of the manna give them two forms of comfort—discipline, and also dignity. Millennia later we too struggle for purpose in a land and life of absolute freedom. The two perspectives of manna are instructive for us as well. Our religious lives benefit from both discipline and dignity. We flourish within limits—relinquishing some liberties for the sake of becoming co-creators with God in a world that reaches for redemption.

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