

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

Isaiah: Visions and Wellsprings of Salvation

It is often interesting to look closely at the haftarah (readings from the Prophets), and wonder about the juxtaposition of texts, themes, and ideas; what is this text looking to tell us or provoke/inspire within us?

On the eighth and final day of Pesah, the haftarah is taken from Isaiah 10:32–12:6, sections that contain some of the most famous images of all prophetic literature. The culmination of the story of the salvation of the Children of Israel brings us a vision of the salvation of all humanity: “[T]hey shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the seabed” (10:9). If enslavement in Egypt is the lowest point of our history, and the Covenant and Revelation between God and Israel at Sinai are the beginning of the path to redemption, it is this prophecy that offers the vision for that hard journey toward redemption.

In Isaiah 10:6, we read that the leopard will lie down with the lamb (and an ironic comment suggests that the lamb might not sleep very well), a calf and lion cub will walk together, and a young child will lead them. This suggests that even the order of nature will be overturned.

An image from this haftarah has entered the ritual of havdalah at the end of Shabbat. The preliminary verses of havdalah include “*Ush'avtem maym besasson mima'aynei hayeshua*” (You shall draw water in joy from the wells of Salvation) [12:3], continuing the “water” metaphor for knowledge of God. There is a tradition that the Messiah will not come on Friday, the eve of Shabbat, because this would be an imposition on the Jewish People in preparing for Shabbat. But there is a strong sense that the end of Shabbat is a time when the Messiah might arrive—and many of the poems and melodies for havdalah and *se'udah selishit* (the third Shabbat meal that leads into havdalah) are filled with mystic visions and musical themes of yearning.

The early Zionists loved this section of Isaiah; they saw the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) as fulfilling the text “a blossom will grow from the stump of Jesse” (Isa. 11:1), and they sang and danced to *Ushavtem Mayim* as we still dance today. As we draw to the end of Pesah, allow yourself to hear as new the vision and dream of Isaiah—and hear his words echo each week at havdalah, especially as we approach Yom Ha'atzma'ut, State of Israel Independence Day.

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarath@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Hol Hamo'ed Pesah 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Hoffman, Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics and Scholar-in-Residence, Development, JTS.

The Light of Passover

When speaking about the ritual of searching for *hametz* on the night before the first seder, the 14th day of the Hebrew month Nisan, the first Mishnah of the Tractate of Pesachim plays with imagery of light:

“**Light** of the fourteenth—we search for leaven with the **light** of a candle.”

The word *light* is used twice in one short sentence, yet does not mean the same thing in both instances. Indeed, the Gemara tells us that the two uses reflect opposite meanings. As the Rabbis of the Talmud understand it, “light of the fourteenth” does not refer to the literal meaning of these words. Instead, *light* refers not to the light of day, but the darkness of evening. Consequently, the Mishnah is teaching us that the ritual of the search for *hametz* should be performed in the darkness of the night before Passover. The second use of the term *light*, however, does in fact refer to light, as the Mishnah instructs us to search for *hametz* by the light of a candle.

Of course, this presents us with the obvious question: Why did the Rabbis use the word *light* when they intended darkness? The Hebrew word *leila* would certainly have worked. Why did the Rabbis not say what they meant?

Maimonides, in his commentary to the Mishnah, suggests a compelling explanation for this unusual use of the word *light*: he suggests the Rabbis were guided by literary concerns. That is to say, it would have been less aesthetically pleasing to begin the tractate on the holiday of Passover with the word *night*. *Darkness* intimates an absence, while *light* (illumination) allows for the appreciation of abundance.

Truth be told, using a word that is the opposite of what one intends is not unknown in both biblical and rabbinic Hebrew. When Jezebel plants false witnesses against Naboth, she tells them to accuse Naboth of having “reviled God and king.” The word used in I Kings 21:10 for *reviled* is *beirakhta* (blessed)—the opposite of what the intended meaning is.

Similarly, we find an example where the Rabbis of the Talmud use the word *bless* when they really mean *curse* (Bava Metzi'a 59b). When the Rabbis tell the famous story of the excommunication of Rabbi Eliezer after his disagreement with the Sages regarding the “oven of Akhnai,” they “bless” him (*barkhuhu*). In the context of this story, however, the word really means that the Sages excommunicated Rabbi Eliezer.

What is certain is that the use of the word *light* for darkness in our Mishnah focuses the reader's attention on both light and darkness in a way that would not have been

accomplished without the use of euphemism. Why might the authors of our Mishnah want to emphasize these themes?

There is a Hasidic commentary to our Mishnah that frames an idea that I find particularly compelling for my own spiritual work over the Passover holiday. This text comes from a commentary on the Haggadah authored by Rabbi Yaakov Leiner (1828–1878), the son of Rabbi Mordechai Leiner of Izbitz (the author of the *Mei Ha-Shiloach*).

Why does the Talmudic Tractate of Pesachim begin with the word “light?”

It is because with the holiday of Passover, God—may God’s name be exalted—shines light and illuminates our vision so that a person will know his or her place and purpose and will see with clarity the root of their own shortcomings. For in truth, all the blessings that God has blessed the people Israel with have *already* been given to them . . . And the inability to see this is caused solely by “the darkness” and “the hiddenness” whereby the human being does not see God’s light—may it be exalted! It is because of this that one’s ultimate place and purpose and reason for being remain hidden from them. This alienation from one’s truest self creates anguish. And the inability to perceive our personal challenges inhibits our ability to heal them. Consequently, we jump from activity to activity in search of spiritual fulfillment. If we were only more whole we would not experience anguish because we would experience joy and faith that God would help us heal our personal shortcomings . . .

It is the holiday of Passover where God shines light so that human beings may understand their place and purpose and realize the source of their own shortcomings.

And with this knowledge there is great joy. It is for this reason that the Talmudic Tractate of Pesachim begins with the word “light,” since the Holy One shines light in order to allow our eyes to see that the Holy One has already given us all our blessings! Our inability to see this has been a result of the “leaven” and “dough” that serves as an impediment for the light to shine forth. (*Sefer Ha-Zemanim*, translated by David Hoffman)

This gorgeous text makes at least two extraordinary claims: (1) every human being has a purpose, a reason for her own individual existence in a particular place and at a certain time in history; and (2) God—in an act of abundant love—has already given each of us the blessings to become the people we need to be. Indeed, in a continued act of love and grace, God shines God’s light in order to allow us to see and heal our personal shortcomings and to emerge as the human beings God needs us to be. It is the “dough” and the “leavening” that inhibit our ability to see the larger purpose of our existence. These constitute the things that each of us needs to separate ourselves from in order to feel more connected to ourselves and to those whom we love. To be more “whole,” we need to remove those things that keep us from being more alive. The “darkness”—the shadow created by the “leavening”—keeps us from seeing that the seeds of our own becoming are already present in our lives. Human pain is not a result of being flawed.

The inability to see and honestly confront our flaws keeps us exiled from our ultimate selves. True joy—wholeness—flows from the awareness that, despite the fact that we are flawed creatures, God is close and wishes to help us see our place and purpose in Creation. This is the meaning of faith. Rabbi Leiner proposes that the Rabbis of the Mishnah used the strange language of “the light of the fourteenth”

to describe the evening when we search by candlelight for the leavened bread in our homes in order to draw attention to God’s love. In this Hasidic formulation, Pesah is a holiday not only about the Nation’s emergence from slavery into freedom, but one that promises a move toward personal redemption, from darkness to illuminated perception.

All my blessings for a *yom tov* open to accept God’s redemptive light.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS.

The Secret of *Shmurah Matzah*

One of the centerpieces of seder night is the eating of matzah, the unleavened bread. And while this reminds us of the haste in which the Israelites departed from the Land of Egypt, it contains another compelling message: we are required to eat not just any piece of matzah, but what is known as *matzah shmurah*, or “guarded matzah.” (This is often called *shmurah matzah* in North America, and it is special because, from the time the wheat is harvested in the field through the baking, there is an additional measure of precaution to ensure that at no point in the process does the wheat become leavened.) The reason we eat this particular matzah is to call to mind the nature of the event described in Exodus 12:42: “That was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the Land of Egypt; that same night is the Lord’s, one of vigil for all the Children of Israel throughout the ages.” Torah tells us that seder evening was “a night of vigil” (*leyl shimurim*) for both God and the Children of Israel. What is the precise meaning of the term *shimurim* (watching or vigil), and how does it affect the way in which we understand the matzah?

While many commentators, including Abraham Ibn Ezra, believe that this term of “a night of watching” refers to God’s act of attentiveness in guarding the homes of the Israelites from the Angel of Death, Ramban offers us a very different perspective. Arguing that the expression is deeply connected to the act of the Israelites for all generations, Nahmanides contends that it is quintessentially “a night of watching” for the Israelites. He writes, “it means that the Israelites are to observe Pesah by worshipping God through the eating of the Passover-offering, the remembering of the miracles, and the recitation of praise and thanksgiving.” In other words, it is a night of *observance* for the Israelites. They are commanded to *observe* the Passover ritual in every generation. In this way, it becomes an evening that is devoted wholly to God. Plugging Ramban’s exegesis back into the text (Exod. 12:42) would lead us to read the opening of this verse in this fashion: “It is a night of observance *dedicated* to the Lord . . .”

Ramban’s reading compels us to both understand and eat the *shmurah matzah* in a different way. According to Ramban, this ritual is about sacredness; that is to say, it directs our hearts and minds to God on this very special evening. In this way, the essential act of the night is timeless, spreading across all generations. Quite beautifully, Ramban links our past, present, and future in his commentary on this annual commemoration of the Jewish journey toward freedom.

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