

Opening the Door in Dark Times

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS

There is a moment in the Passover seder that I always find very poignant, though I suspect it is not for the same reason that it moves so many others. It is the opening of the door for Elijah, just after we've given thanks for the festival meal and before completing the uplifting songs of *Hallel*. Elijah is anticipated as the herald of the Messiah, and so opening the door, especially at the Feast of Redemption, is to welcome the long-awaited Redemption (such is the understanding of the practice by the Maharil in the 14th–15th century). The poignancy of that ritual moment for me is, alas, downbeat in nature. For we know by induction from centuries of experience, including the worst of times, it is nearly certain that there will be no one at the door. We may indulge a fantasy, imagining an invisible visitor somehow sipping wine. But invisible redeemers, though they may fascinate and delight our children, are no substitute for the real thing that the world so desperately needs. And so, I sadly see the opening of the door as an inevitable dashing of hope.



What can the mood be in these times, this year, when we open our doors? We are, after all, witnesses to unprecedented corruption from so many leaders at home and abroad, and the cruelty of separating children from parents who are left

We fear for the triumph of injustice and for the fate of democracy and decency. There is dissonance between our fear and despair on the one hand, and the triumphalism in the words of the Haggadah on the other, which may be difficult to bear.

with almost no recourse. How can we sing words of welcome to the invisible Elijah without those words turning to ash in our mouths?

The German scholar Daniel Goldschmidt, in his commentary on the Haggadah, took note of a paradox inherent in the Passover eve liturgy from the start. For the seder came into existence after the destruction of the Second Temple. And yet, as the Mishnah tells us, the liturgy included *Hallel* and a “Blessing of Song.” Goldschmidt commented as follows: “The praises of God contained in the *Hallel*, gratitude for all the kindnesses shown to God’s people, rescuing and protecting them from danger, must have spoken to the post-destruction generations as sardonic humor (literally: mocking the unfortunate).” It surely was that for so many generations of Jews who had experienced poverty,

persecutions, and pogroms. And it is just as surely for us. We fear for the triumph of injustice and for the fate of democracy and decency. There is dissonance between our fear and despair on the one hand, and the triumphalism in the words of the Haggadah on the other, which may be difficult to bear.

What then can we do? It is perhaps instructive that the opening of the door is followed by a recitation of verses beginning with lines from Psalm 79: “Pour out your fury on the peoples who do not know You.”

To whom are these words addressed? The conventional answer is that they are addressed to God, who is asked to inflict retribution on those who have harmed God’s people. But perhaps we can imagine the “you” here to be each celebrant at the seder reading the Haggadah. That is, after we see the emptiness at the hoped-for door of redemption, we are prompted to pour out our *own* fury at what the world can inflict. We need the catharsis of expressing rage at the violation of human

bodies and souls, the cruel shipping of those bodies to places unknown as if they were disposable commodities, and the disenfranchisement of those who were promised the equality God ordained for human beings.

So yes, the expression of rage is not out of place. It is natural and does no good when it is kept in. But there is one more crucial element in this cathartic moment that must not be missed. For the anger to which we give expression is placed just before the third psalm of the *Hallel*, Psalm 115. The opening words are: “Lo lanu, A-donai, lo lanu, ki leshimkha ten kavod” (“Not for us, Lord, not for us, but rather for the glory of Your name”). Goldschmidt believed that the cathartic verses of anger were intentionally placed here as a preamble to Psalm 115. And that juxtaposition, as we ponder all that ails the world today, conveys a very weighty and critical message. We are given leave to express our wrath at what the pre-messianic world can mete out, but then we are immediately reminded that the anger must translate itself into acts that are not about *our* aggrandizement or felt need for revenge but exist solely to further the kind of world that gives testimony to God’s presence and purposes.

As the door opens this year, let us both testify to the truth of our shredded emotions and yet work for the truth of God’s purposes for the world and its inhabitants.

Adapted from a piece created for the Academy of Jewish Religion.



MS 4481, copied and illustrated by Joel ben Simeon in Germany around 1445, pairs *Shefoch hamatkha*—“Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You.” (Ps. 79:6; 69:25)—with a scene of Elijah riding a donkey and sounding a shofar. The verses call for divine judgment on persecuting powers. Elijah, rabbinic herald of the Messiah, signals imminent redemption; the donkey recalls Zechariah 9:9. The shofar, instrument of revelation and ingathering (Isa. 27:13), shifts the focus from vengeance to covenantal restoration, integrating eschatological hope into the Passover liturgy.

