

The Same-ness of the Other

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Parshat Beshallah

On Seder night, as we recite the litany of the Ten Plagues, we dip a drop of the grape from our cups at the mention of each Plague. The spilled drops signify a diminution of our cup of joy, for our joy can never be complete if it comes at the cost of another's suffering, however deserving of suffering we believe the other to be. When we spill the drops of joy, we are reminded that the Mitzrim (Egyptians, but we use the Hebrew name to signify the "narrowness" implicit in the Hebrew word – from *maytzar*, meaning *narrow* or *constricted* – as well as to signify that we are speaking not just about an historical event but about a way of thinking, a state of mind) suffered terribly in order for us to gain our freedom. As King Solomon teaches us (Proverbs 24:17), **Rejoice not when thine enemy falls**. Our celebration must be tempered with compassion.

Whence cometh this tradition? It is derived from a midrash based loosely on this week's Parshah. The Pillar of Cloud, we are told (Exodus 14:20), **came between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Israel . . . and the one could not come near the other all night long**. The Talmudic sage Rabbi Yohanan understood this as a description not just of what happened at the Border-Sea (*Yam Suf*, but reading it, with only the slightest vowel change, as *Yam-Sof*), but of the heavenly realm as well. The angels, he said, wanted to unite in song to celebrate the Israelites' freedom, but G*d would not permit them even to assemble. As the angels moved toward each other to break out in song, G*d chastised them tearfully, saying, "How dare you sing when My beloved children are drowning?" And G*d ensured that "one [angel] could not come near another all night long."

No matter how merciless the Mitzrim may have been, they, too, bear the imprint of G*d's image. Rabbi Yohanan projects onto G*d a standard of behavior –

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compassion for those who have no compassion for us – that runs wholly counter to our instincts, and, as we are taught to follow in G*d's ways, that behavior is to be a pattern for us. We must never perceive the other as wholly other, for the other is a beautiful, beloved child of G*d, created in the image and after the likeness of our Divine Parent, exactly as are we.

The ritual of Passover gives voice to this ideal in another way as well. On the historical Festivals (including the intermediate days), during Hanukkah, and on Rosh Hodesh, the New Month, we recite the set of Psalms (113-118) known as Hallel. On Rosh Hodesh, apparently because it is of lesser import than are the Festivals, we omit two half-Psalms (the first half of the 115th and 116th), and we call what remains “Half Hallel.” (Mathematically, it's about 70% Hallel, but why quibble?) On the last six days of Passover (*Hol haMoed* and the final Festival days), we also recite only the “Half Hallel.” Why? It is not because the intermediate and final days of Passover are of lesser import, comparable to Rosh Hodesh rather than to the Festivals; we recite the full Hallel on the intermediate days of Succot and on all the other historical Festival days, as well as on all eight days of Hanukkah, even though Hanukkah does not have Festival status.

Hallel is a chant of Thanksgiving. It both symbolizes and expresses our joy. But, just as we reduce our cups of joy on Seder night to acknowledge the suffering of the Mitzrim in the Plagues, so we reduce our expression of joy (the Hallel) on the day when the Mitzrim were drowned (traditionally understood as the final Festival day of Pesah). Having reduced the Hallel on the final Festival day (on both final Festival days outside the Land of Israel), it would be unseemly not to reduce it similarly on the intermediate days of the Holiday.

To an awareness of the same-ness of the other, may we speedily be led.

Shabbat Shalom.