

Post Script to Hoshana Rabbah

After having circled the synagogue seven times holding our lulavs and etrogs, we set them aside and pick up a bunch of willows. We then recite a magnificent piyyut which concludes with the words קול מבשר מבשר ואומר - *Kol Mevasser Mevasser Ve-omer - The voice of the herald spreads the word, telling of it.* This sentence is recited three times. At that point the willow branches are smacked on the floor five times. We are all puzzled by this practice. To some it harkens back to the prominence of the willow in the Temple ceremonies as a symbol of water. The willow wilts easily and like us, it urgently presents its supplication for life-saving water in the form of rain. To others it is explained that as the willow leaves separate from the branch, so may sin separate from us. I would like to offer a controversial explanation. One member of our daily minyan – now a member of our heavenly counterpart – used to joke that he would prefer that we smack him! Maybe he was hinting at something. The smacking of the willows is a violent act. In fact, it's a flogging. Sephardim have another flogging custom when they smack seder participants with scallions to re-create the suffering of our ancestors at the hands of the Egyptians. Maybe, by *flogging* the floor we are actually redirecting the actual flogging that we ought to have received for all of our transgressions. This is **the last, actual, wordless thing that we can do to demonstrate our sincerity!** At this moment we resort to the physical, the symbolic, indeed the violent act (!) to mark the end of the season. Now the book is sealed. Period. We have executed our symbolic self-punishment by symbolic self-flagellation only by making it look like we are not flagellating ourselves! Maybe this is a “boundary” ritual, a Havdalah of sorts, and now, we can really begin again. Life regenerates after cataclysm. Embedded in this ritual, as Eliyahu Kitov writes, סודות עמוקים ותיקונים גדולים – deep secrets and great restorative-purposes. The words: קול מבשר מבשר ואומר come from Isaiah 52:7-8. מה-נאוו עליהם רים. רגלי מבשר משמיע שלום מבשר טוב משמיע ישועה אמר: לציון מלך אלקיך: *How welcome on the mountain Are the footsteps of the herald* Announcing

happiness, Heralding good fortune, Announcing victory, Telling Zion, “Your God is King!” קול צפנה נשאו קול יחדו ירגנו כי עין בעין יראו בשוב ה' ציון: *Hark! Your watchmen raise their voices, As one they shout for joy; For every eye shall behold the LORD's return to Zion.* Isaiah depicts the herald's joyful announcement that God is now finally sovereign over the world and an era of peace, goodness, salvation has begun. Thus, the Hoshana Rabbah ritual is not only cathartic as the terminus to a period of fervent prayer, it is also – we hope! – the harbinger of the messianic dream. In the deepest sense then, this miniature act of violence, punishment or catharsis, clears the way for a new restoration. לעלו נשמת משה אהרון בן מרדכי הלוי ואסתר פעריל ז"ל.

From the Torah Reading for Shmini Atzeret

דברים ט"ז: י"ג תג הספת תעשה לה שבעת ימים באספה מארנה ומיקבד:

Deuteronomy 16:13 *After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days.* Only two of the three defining foods of the Land of Israel are referenced here. **Threshing floor** refers to grain and **vat** refers to grapes. Passover celebrates the beginning of the barley harvest; Shavuot, that of the wheat. Grapes are harvested at the end of the summer and by Sukkot all the grapes and grain would have been harvested and readied for the upcoming months, hence the references in this verse. But what about the olives? Olives are not harvested in Israel until late October and November. Olive oil production commences afterwards. The story of the Maccabees aside, it may not be a calendrical accident that olive oil takes center stage at Hanukkah (a holiday fashioned after Sukkot).

דברים ט"ז: י"ד ושמחת בחגך אתה ובנך ובתך ונעבדך ואמנתך והלוי והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בשעריך:

Deuteronomy 16:14 *You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities.*

We note that the male and female slave are also required to rejoice and that they are given a prominence in this listing second only to *your son and daughter* and they take precedence over *the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow,*

who were everyone's responsibility. Just as the requirement of the slave to rest on the Sabbath undermined the institution of slavery, here too, the obligation that the slave rejoice on festivals also undermined slavery. Slavery was endemic to all societies and exists to this day. The Torah does not abolish slavery, but constantly undermines it by highlighting the humanity of the slave: his/her right to a day of weekly rest and seasonal joy.

דברים ט"ז:י"ז איש כמתנת יְדוּ ...

Deuteronomy 16:17 *but each with his own gift, Each of us has our own uniqueness, our own gift. The deep spiritual truth of community and peoplehood is that out of many unique individuals, with many unique attributes and characteristics, we become one.*

From the Haftarah for Shmini Atzeret

מלכים א ח:י"ד וַיְהִי כִּכְלֹת שְׁלֹמֹה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־ה' אֵת קֶל־הַתְּפִלָּה וְהַתְחַנֵּן הַזֹּאת קָם מִלִּפְנֵי מִזְבֵּחַ ה' מִכְרַע עַל־בְּרָכָיו וְכָפְיוּ פְרָעוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם:

I Kings 8:54 *When Solomon finished offering to the LORD all this prayer and supplication, he rose from where he had been kneeling, in front of the altar of the LORD, his hands spread out toward heaven. In the Diaspora we have the fortune of reading this amazing text. We turn back to the theme of the Temple Dedication. Solomon has given a long prayer, and this haftara is the closing benediction of that prayer.*

ח:י"ה וַיַּעֲמֵד וַיְבָרֵךְ אֵת קְלִי־קֶהֱל יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹל גָּדוֹל...

8:55 *He stood, and in a great voice blessed the whole congregation of Israel: There are throngs of people assembled and no amplification. How would anyone have heard him? A great voice was required.*

ח:י"ז וַיְהִי ה' אֵלֵינוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר הָיָה עִם־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵינוּ:

8:57 *May the LORD our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He never abandon or forsake us. The fear of divine abandonment is palpable. It's easy to feel God's presence when we are all assembled at the Temple, but how do you translate that into your everyday life? That's what Judaism is for. Thus...*

ח:י"ח לְהִטּוֹת לְבַבְנוּ אֵלָיו לְלֶכֶת בְּכָל־דְּרָכָיו וּלְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקָּיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ:

8:58 *May He incline our hearts to Him, that we may walk in all His ways and keep the commandments, the laws, and the rules, which He enjoined upon our fathers. Doing mitzvot will ensure that God will remain with us.*

ח:י"ט וַיְהִי דְבַר־י אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר הִתְחַנֵּנְתִּי לִפְנֵי ה' קוֹרְבָּימ אֵלֵינוּ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט עִבְדוֹ וּמִשְׁפָּט עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּבַר־יָוָם בְּיוֹמוֹ:

8:59 *And may these words of mine, which I have offered in supplication before the LORD, be close to the LORD our God day and night, that He may provide for His servant and for His people Israel, according to each day's needs— With the thousands and thousands of sheep and cattle that have been turned into smoke, it's interesting that Solomon wants his words to be close to God rather than the sacrifices. This is stunning. Sacrifice is temporary. Words can become eternal. And in fact, these words are! Key passages of this prayer are quoted in the regular liturgy to this day. At Gettysburg, Lincoln underscored the sacrifice not his words: *The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.* Lincoln knew he was being ironic. He knew what he was doing. Today we remember the words spoken at Gettysburg and not one single soldier who died there.*

ח:ס"ו בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שָׁחָ אֶת־הָעֶם וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּלְכוּ לְאֶהֱלֵיהֶם שְׂמֵחִים וְטוֹבֵי לֵב עַל כָּל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְדָוִד עִבְדוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ:

8:66 *On the eighth day he let the people go. They bade the king good-bye and went to their homes, joyful and glad of heart over all the goodness that the LORD had shown to His servant David and His people Israel. And they bless him too. Our final word pair: joyful and good-hearted. It conveys a sense of physical satisfaction, heartiness, as one who has finished a great meal and, given that the grape harvest is in, has also drunk a great deal of wine. It's not an accident that this expression has a hint of fleetingness. We find it in Kohelet 9:7 *Go, eat your bread in joy and drink your wine good-heartedly.* Kohelet understands how fleeting this satisfaction is, so he encourages it as a constant activity. In Esther 5:9 the sense is darker. Haman is described this way after his private feast with Esther, and then we see how quick he turns on Mordecai. Our haftarah, while ending on a high note, trembles with foreshadowing for Solomon.*