

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Metzora, Leviticus, Chapters 14-15 | April 20, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Pesach in Jerusalem: Yesteryear and Today

It was eerie, and unplanned. As I entered the synagogue this past Shabbat to deliver an afternoon lecture, news had begun to spread that multitudes of drones had been launched by Iran against Israel. But without access to online information, we had little knowledge of what was unfolding. As a sense of a looming threat to Israel pervaded the room, the subject of the class suddenly seemed strikingly relevant.

I had prepared a talk about *Pesach*—not only about the holiday, but about the very meaning of the word “*pesach*,” and the way in which it is often misunderstood. While the verb from which it is derived is usually translated as “pass over,” my contention was that the term connoted the exact opposite: God’s hovering over, and protecting, a home or a city from a looming threat. My primary proof-text was a passage from Isaiah, describing one of Jerusalem’s greatest moments of peril. The Assyrian hordes had rapidly swept over the northern kingdom of Israel, ten tribes in all, exiling and assimilating them so that they were lost to our people. The Assyrian king Sennacherib then set his sights on the southern kingdom of Judea, ruled by the faithful Hezekiah, the faithful descendant of David. As the invading forces surround Jerusalem, God, through His prophet Isaiah, assures the sacred city that it will be saved:

For thus the Lord has said to me:
As a lion—a great beast—
Growls over its prey
And, when the shepherds gather
In force against him,
Is not dismayed by their cries
Nor cowed by their noise—
So the Lord of hosts will descend to make war
Against the mount and the hill of Zion. (Isaiah 31:4)

God, in other words, will attack the Assyrians assembled on Mount Zion at the walls of Jerusalem. And then Scripture introduces another simile:

Like the birds that fly, even so will the Lord of hosts shield Jerusalem, shielding and saving, **protecting** and rescuing. (Isaiah 31:5)



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In Hebrew, “protecting,” is “*poseach*,” with the same root as “*pesach*.” God did indeed shield Jerusalem, unleashing His wrath on the Assyrian army. I discussed all this that Shabbat afternoon, and concluded the class with a parallel prayer: that God shield Jerusalem from attack once again, that He perform a *pesach* for the sacred city, allowing it to emerge unscathed. Reentering the digital world after Shabbat, the image of iron dome intercepting missiles over the Temple Mount took on a renewed significance.

Pondering this word’s significance is thus all the more relevant in our current moment, as we prepare for the festival. And understanding our own *parashah* allows us better to appreciate the meaning of this holiday’s name, and that name’s acute relevance for the moment in which we find ourselves.

Both last week’s reading and our own focus on the mysterious malady known as *tsara’at*, and what is to occur if an individual, or a garment, or a home is afflicted with it. While it is difficult to understand what precisely *tsara’at* is, it is clear that the pronouncing of purity and impurity is entirely in the domain of the priest: only after he has declared that the affliction truly is *tsara’at* is it considered a source of defilement. Similarly, it is the priest, the *kohen*, who oversees the ritual of purification when the *tsara’at* has abated.

Let us look at the way in which a priest purifies a man or woman. Two birds are taken; one is slaughtered, and its blood is placed upon the infected person using the other bird. But the bird is joined to other objects, and one of them is significantly relevant to Passover:

Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two living clean birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and **hyssop**. And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water. As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet and the **hyssop** and shall dip them and the living bird in the **blood** of the bird that was killed over the running water. And he shall sprinkle upon he that is to be cleansed from the *tsara’at* seven times, and shall pronounce him pure, and shall let go the living bird into the open field. (Leviticus 14:4–7)

What is going on here? One important ingredient in the ritual is hyssop, which, as we will see, is employed throughout Scripture as a spiritual sponge. Here, the hyssop, dipped in the blood of one bird, serves to draw the impurity from the once-afflicted person, transferring the defilement to the live bird, who flies away with it forever. The hyssop and the blood join to purify. The same can be said for the purification of a house afflicted with *tsara’at*, one of the stranger phenomena described in our *parashah*.

If, however, the priest comes and sees that the plague has not spread in the house after the house was replastered, the priest shall pronounce the house clean, for the plague has healed. To purge the house, he shall take two birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and **hyssop**. He shall slaughter the one bird over fresh water in an earthen vessel. He shall take the cedar wood, the **hyssop**, the crimson stuff, and the live bird, and dip them in the **blood** of the slaughtered bird and the fresh water, and sprinkle on the house seven times. (Leviticus 14: 48–51)

Here, too, the hyssop and blood are used to purify the home. This, we can now understand, perfectly parallels the ritual performed by our ancestors in Egypt. Moses tells them:



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Select lambs for yourselves according to your families, and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of **hyssop** and dip it in the **blood** which is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the **blood** which is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. (Exodus 12:21–22)

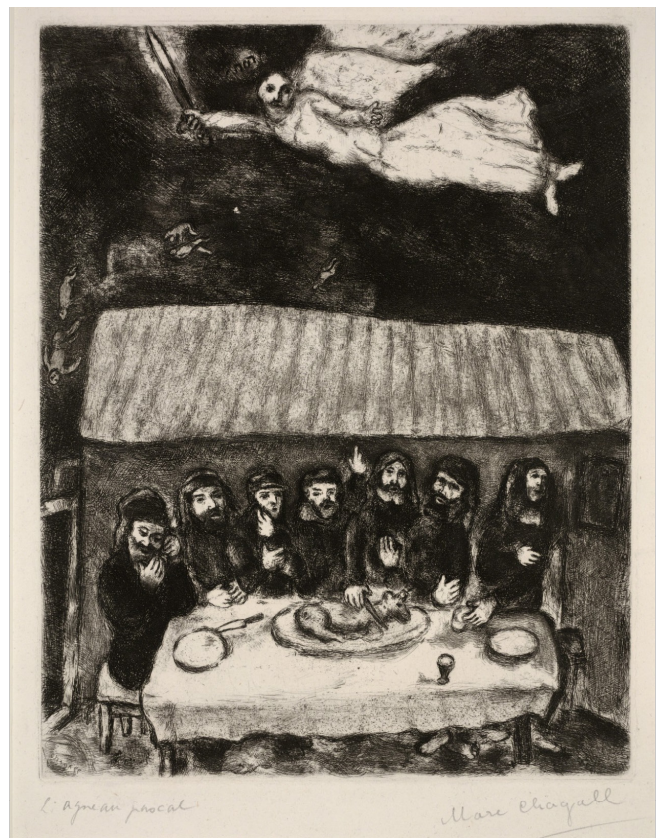
We can now understand that here too the blood and the hyssop are used to purify the house of the Israelite slave. But it is not *tsara'at* that is being targeted, but the impurity of pagan Egypt; the homes are being turned into places of purity, so that God can dwell among His people. The word "*pesach*," rightly understood, refers to God "hovering over," or "protecting," and shielding, the homes of the Israelites, from the "destroyer" that He has unleashed on Egypt. Thus the next verse in Exodus:

For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will **hover over** (*pasach*) the door, and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you. (Exodus 12:23)

The ritual, then, is quite similar to the purification of a house from *tsara'at*, but there is, of course, one profound difference. In Egypt, there was no *kohen*, no priest administering the blood to the doorposts; the ritual of purification was performed by the members of the households themselves, and then God dwelt therein as He did in the Temple. To put it differently, what was born on the eve of the Exodus is the notion of the Jewish home as a miniature temple, and those who lead the households as its covenantal *kobanim*, the members of its priesthood. It is the Israelites themselves who turn their homes into fortresses of resilience and faith, as the plague of death stalks outside. The scene is brought memorably into existence in an etching by Marc Chagall (right).

This, of course, was the first seder in history. Yet it bears noting that at this moment the Israelites in Egypt were still enslaved; only in the morning would they truly leave the land. But it is this moment of *Pesach*, above all, that we remember every year at our own seders, as we cele-

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The word “*pesach*,” rightly understood, refers to God “hovering over,” or “protecting,” and shielding, the homes of the Israelites . . .

The political message is profound: freedom will only be lived wisely and well if we remember the faith, and the courage, and the vision that our ancestors illustrated before they were free, and for which freedom was bestowed.

In a striking article, Rachel Sharansky described how, on the anniversary of her father’s release from Soviet prison, her family gathers for a private festival of liberation, in which her father Natan Sharansky describes the story of his captivity, of the God he found in the cell through reading the Psalms, and of the fellowship with the Jewish people he felt so intensely. She tells us:

Every year, on this day, my family gathers for a private “seder” of sorts. My father wears the *kipa* a fellow inmate made for him. He pulls out the little Psalms book that was his companion in prison. And like the children on Pesach, we ask questions to celebrate this exodus. When we were younger, my sister and I mostly wanted to understand what “prison” was, and were there animals there, perchance? But as we grew and matured, our questions expanded with us. How did you find the strength to go on, Ima and Abba? And how did you survive the shock of normal life, once restored?

Rachel Sharansky ends her reflection by explaining how her yearly reliving of those moments as a child, and her reenacting them now with her own children, have shaped her every experience of the freedom she enjoys in Israel today.

I wouldn’t be here today if you, the Jews of the world, wouldn’t have opened your hearts and your homes and your purses. . . . I want you to know that I remember, and that I am grateful. I want you to know that when I saw my parents playing with their grandchildren near Lefortovo Prison several years ago, it was your victory that made me almost dance with joy. Thirty-five years earlier, my father’s KGB investigator told him that “we don’t let heroes leave Lefortovo alive.” You, the Jewish People, proved him wrong.

Your spirit and strength in those years freed a man, and brought an empire to its knees. When I feel tired, when I fear for the future, when we squabble and fight within ourselves, I go back to your echos inside me, and find hope.

We cannot celebrate our freedom if we cannot remember the moment when our ancestors felt God before freedom; we can only appreciate freedom if, like Rachel Sharansky, we learn from the fortitude of the past.

It is indeed eerie to pray for the protection of Jerusalem right before a holiday whose name means “protection.” But the very name reminds us of the miracles of Jewish history; and how no other people could pray for the protection of Jerusalem thousands of years ago, and do the same today in the same city, in the same language, to the very same God Whose promises endure. And we know that as Assyria is no more, so will ultimately be said of the enemies of Israel today.



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In the book *Letters from Jerusalem*, we find the correspondence of Tziporah Porath, an American Jew who came to Jerusalem in 1947. Writing to her parents in April of 1948, she described a Jewish community besieged by the enemy just before *Pesach*, yet determined to celebrate the festival of freedom.

The people in this country are simply made of iron. It is unbelievable what they have to endure and how much they'll yet have to endure before this is over. I am not alone in my feeling of foreboding. Everyone senses that there are very difficult days ahead.

The Arab plan is not only to strangle our communication lines and destroy our outposts but to lay siege to the city and starve us into submission . . .

Any way you look at it, the picture is already grim. There have been no convoys out of the city for a week and, worse yet, none have arrived in Jerusalem. Food and water supplies are getting critically low and our worst nightmare, isolation from the Jewish State, may ensue. But, believe it or not, spirits are high. Everyday life goes on . . .

I look at it this way. I am not a better or a worse person, a braver or a weaker person than anyone else here. As long as they can take it, I should be able to and, perhaps, then some.

In the end, a convoy did arrive before Passover and Tziporah Porath attended a seder at the home of a Sephardi family. Though danger lurked beyond Jewish Jerusalem, the moment was marked in joy. And as she left with her friend, she encountered an Ashkenazi home; her descriptions of both celebrations in the midst of war bring to mind the drawing of Chagall. And as we read, we understand that these seder celebrants were nothing less than high priests of their households, who had purified and sanctified their homes, homes in which God dwelt.

Porath continues:

Despite the terrible food shortage, a meal of sorts was served, simple but plentiful, with *kneidlach* [matzah balls] made from something that tasted like nuts. When the singing started it was really *sameach* [merry]. I was asked to sing the melodies I knew, which were very different from theirs. But, judging by the way they all beamed, my performance must have been enjoyable and interesting for them.

We had to leave early because of the long walk home, . . .

We took a shortcut home to be out of the firing line from the Generali Building [the British Mandatory government office compound] and passed through the crowded Mahaneh Yehudah area, a very religious community. At one house we saw by the flickering candle light in the window a large family group huddled around the holiday table, the youngsters' earlocks dangling on the cloth, all singing with Hassidic fervor, transported with joy. Their singing had a haunting quality I cannot convey. Every corner of the deserted cobblestone alley reverberated with the sound of it, echoed and reechoed from every house. We hit the open road near Romema and broke into song ourselves, joined by the guards we passed at the various check-posts and roadblocks en route.

As Passover arrives this year, we pray for the protection of Jerusalem, and for the liberation of those who are in bondage; and we do so sustained by the memory of the faith and fortitude of those who came before.



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Additional Resources

Rachel Sharansky on Celebrating Her Father's Freedom, "30 years after Glienicke Bridge," February 11, 2016.
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