PROMETHEUS’ HAVDALAH: Divine Dependence & Human Self-Reliance

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THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH

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THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH
The Ateret Zvi Prize recognizes yearly a work of innovative and exceptional Torah scholarship. The prize is endowed in loving memory of Professor and Rabbi Zvi H. Szubin, a lifelong scholar and teacher who uncovered rich insights buried in traditional texts using legal, historical, and linguistic tools—an approach he termed “text archaeology.”

Professor Szubin studied at Yeshivat Hevron and received the smikhah of yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin from Chief Rabbi Herzog. He served in the Israeli Army for three years, and was deployed to the Sinai during the 1956 Sinai campaign. After completing university and an LL.B. degree in Israel, he came to the United States and received his Ph.D. from Dropsie College. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the City College of New York and, ultimately, became the Chair of the Classical Languages and Hebrew Department at City College. Professor Szubin was a supporter of Hadar, in particular its fierce commitment to traditional Jewish values and texts, its unabashed egalitarianism, and its promising efforts to energize thoughtful Jews of all ages.
INTRODUCTION:
AGGADAH AS A MEANS OF ILLUMINATION

Oftentimes, the aggadic stories of the Rabbinic canon give a voice to the heart of Judaism in a way that a pure halakhic discourse might otherwise downplay in its appeal to the mind. One such example, Motzei Shabbat Hanukkah, highlights this potential gap between the halakhah and the aggadah. From the perspective of lived Judaism, how can one help but connect the weekly flame of the Havdalah wicks with the burning Hanukkah candles that are lit adjacent? And yet, when we look in the halakhah, not only do we find very little material connecting the two mitzvot, we find a vast and unresolved confusion about the relationship between these two flames.

Dozens of halakhic authorities have weighed in with an array of legal principles and reasoning over the generations to try and figure out whether one should light Hanukkah candles or recite the Havdalah (with its accompanying candle) first, and no definitive ruling or logic has prevailed. Indeed, this seems to be one of those rare times in halakhah where anything goes—a laissez faire ruling perhaps best illustrated by the most common American practice surrounding the Havdalah/Hanukkah candle conundrum. In America, the most common custom to prevail has been to light Hanukkah candles first in Shul, but to give Havdalah the preferential treatment when we recite it privately in our homes—a seemingly open and shameless contradiction of legal reasoning!

And yet, while the halakhah may confuse our understanding of Havdalah and ner hanukkah, the aggadah picks up on this obvious connection, and offers up two parallel stories, linking the two mitzvot and clarifying their relationship.
The Bavli, in the context of trying to identify pagan holidays, tells the following *aggadah* about the winter solstice holiday.

*תלמוד בבלי ע''ז ח
t"ר לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך אמר
אוי לי שמא בשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעידי וחוזר
לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים
עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענה ובתפלה

כינו שראה התוֹחֵת שבת ראה ים שמאたり הוהל
אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים
לשנה האחרת עשאן אלו אלו ימים טובים הוא
קבעם לשם שמים והם קבעום לשם עבודת כוכבים

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a
*The Sages taught: When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively diminishing, as the days become shorter from the autumnal equinox until the winter solstice, he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven, as it is written: “And to dust shall you return” (Genesis 3:19). He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer.*

*Once he saw that the season of Tevet, i.e., the winter solstice, had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening after the solstice, he said: Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this is the order of the world. He went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of festivities. He, Adam, established these* 

festsivals *for the sake of Heaven, but they, the gentiles of later generations, established them for the sake of idol worship.*

As history's first winter solstice approached, and the light of day became shorter, Adam—having never experienced short winter days before—feared that the world was coming to an end as a fulfillment of the curse he received on his way out of Eden. Fearing the worst, Adam desperately prayed and fasted to God for eight days, asking for mercy. After the eighth day, though, the solstice had passed and the days began to get longer. Recognizing that hours of daylight wax and wane naturally with the seasons, Adam created an eight-day holiday in appreciation of God.

As per the conclusion of the story, during the winter solstice season, when the nights are long and dark, Adam created an eight-day holiday for God. Undoubtedly, the rabbis here are describing a proto-Hanukkah holiday and identifying its origins all the way back with the earliest human. This early origin of Hanukkah is particularly surprising, as we know Hanukkah is a post-biblical holiday, so one would not necessarily expect this talmudic tale to identify its origins with biblical Adam. But beyond the confusing chronology, the idea of linking Hanukkah—a holiday seemingly tied to a specific historical event surrounding the Hasmonean dynasty—to the winter solstice, and thereby, to our general relationship with God as mediated through nature, seems completely out of place. Hanukkah is not Tu Bishvat, nor even Rosh Hashanah. What does it have to do with God's role in creation or man's appreciation for nature?

On its own, this text seems impossibly cryptic. Thankfully, a broader analysis of the Rabbinic literature will prove that this story should not be read alone. Indeed, this *aggadah* has a partner—found in the Yerushalmi—and can only truly be understood when the two are

2 Translation from Koren-Steinsaltz, found on sefaria.org.
YERUSHALMI: HAVDALAH’S PROMETHEAN ORIGINS

While the Bavli told an Adam story that culminated in the creation of a proto-Hanukkah, the Yerushalmi tells a familiar Adam story, but this time, it culminates in the creation of ner havdalah, the candle lit as part of the Havdalah ceremony.

According to the midrash in the Yerushalmi, it was not Adam's first winter that terrified him, but rather, his very first taste of the darkness of the non-Edenic world. At the conclusion of the first Shabbat (Adam's dramatic introduction to life that resulted in humanity's exile from paradise), night fell, and the world got dark. Adam, now exiled from Eden and cursed, was afraid for his life, fearing that an animal—such as a snake—may attack him in the dark while he could not defend himself. In response, God shows Adam how to make fire for protection. In celebration of this fire, Shmuel concludes we should light a lamp as part of our Havdalah ceremony.

HUMANITY-MADE FIRE AND DIVINE LIGHT

Yet, the parallel between these two stories highlights the differences between them. While in the Hanukkah story, Adam's reaction is to pray and fast, in the Havdalah story, Adam is equipped with flint to create fire for himself. And, following this difference, while the conclusion of the Hanukkah story is Adam's establishment of a holiday in appreciation and recognition of God, the conclusion of the Havdalah story features no holiday in God's honor, but rather, Adam's ability to take care of himself. It is hard to miss the intertextuality between this myth and the Greek myth of Prometheus, the titan who stole fire from the Greek gods and gave it to humanity, the archetypal story of man's rebellious independence from the divine. Indeed, it seems that, in contrast to Bavli Adam's devotional acts of divine de-
pendence—praying and fasting that God will solve the problem—the Yerushalmi’s protagonist is Prometheus-like Adam, trailblazing a path for human independence.

Thus, when read together, these two stories present a spectrum of life perspectives with two opposite ends. In the Hanukkah story, Adam is depicted as helpless, and God as the savior. Adam thinks he is going to be destroyed, prays and fasts to God, realizes God has a plan for how to run the world, and commemorates his previous anxious prayers as a future holiday of thanksgiving and appreciation to God. The only “actions” Adam takes are devotional, and the culmination is a holiday commemorating God, the true actor in the story. In the Havdalah story, while God still obviously plays a role and ultimately shows Adam the flint he uses to make fire, Adam is depicted as much more active. He does not pray or fast, but rather, accepts a solution to his problems and begins to fend for himself. He creates fire and cares for himself, albeit with God’s initial guidance. Fittingly, the takeaway for future generations is not a holiday thanking God, but rather, a practice commemorating Adam—as we light a fire Motzei Shabbat to reenact Adam’s Prometheus-like Havdalah. Thus, Adam’s proto-Hanukkah serves as a model of utter dependence on God, while Adam’s proto-Havdalah presents an archetypal myth for humanity’s ability to care for itself.

HUMANITY’S CURSE

Given this thematic framing, one of the less obvious details of our aggadot begins to take on a greater significance as well. In both the Bavli’s and Yerushalmi’s Adam stories, Adam fears he is about to die, and references the curse he and Eve received upon their expulsion from Eden as the impetus for his death. In the Bavli, Adam says, “Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven.” Adam clearly references his recent punishment of mortality. In the Yerushalmi, the reference is made even more explicit as aggadic Adam quotes an actual verse from Adam’s curse in Genesis 3:15: “You will bruise its head, and it will bruise your heel.”

On one level, Adam’s reference to his recent curse makes sense. If Adam had not recently been cast out of Eden and forced to fend for himself, the circumstances would never have arisen for either story. God and Adam would have had a clear line of communication, living in harmony in Eden, and Adam would never have had to encounter fear. However, once we appreciate these stories in context of each other, I think this reference to humanity’s curse has particular significance.

Following Adam and Eve’s fall from Eden, God curses Adam as follows (Genesis 3:17):

And to Adam God said: “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you, saying: ‘You shall not eat of it;’ cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life.”

At the heart of Adam’s punishment for eating from the tree is curse “in toil shall you eat from ground all the days of your life.” In other words, the very crux of God’s curse to Adam is not the loss of paradise or even the loss of a close relationship with the Almighty, but rather, the anxiety of self-reliance. Adam will have to work hard to produce food and survive. In other words, the Edenic rift between Adam and God that set the norms for all of humanity to follow is best characterized by humanity’s need to struggle and worry about providing for one’s self and one’s family.

Surely, there is no more fitting of a theme for our aggadot, with their implicit interrogation of humanity’s struggles and limitations.

5 It is worth reflecting upon why a verse from God’s curse to the snake was chosen to represent the fear of mortality and punishment, and not God’s curse towards humanity, but that is beyond the scope of this analysis.
self-dependence in the face of reliance on God, than humanity’s anxiety of self-reliance. Adam is chosen as the actor or character in this midrash, and his recent expulsion from Eden and the associated curse are picked as the backdrop, in order to emphasize the themes being tackled. In presenting two models of how man can relate to the seesaw between human ingenuity and divine dependence, the author(s) of the midrash create a Jewish myth and archetype of this existentially human condition by identifying it with humanity’s eternal struggle since Eden to situate itself and the viability of its own self-reliance relative to God.

UNDERSTANDING MITZVOT THROUGH AGGADAH

Additionally, beyond the significance Adam brings to the aggadah, the fact that this spectrum of values is being expressed through the contrast of Hanukkah and Havdalah is not merely coincidental, but serves to illuminate the core themes that lie at the heart of these two mitzvot. Hanukkah, at least through the primary talmudic lens, is a holiday dedicated to God’s role in Jewish history, as God miraculously protects the Jewish people and pulls the strings for an often obfuscated divine plan. Indeed, we know that despite the major role humans played in the holiday—raising an army and successfully rebelling against the world’s largest empire of the time—the rabbis in the Talmud don’t even mention the military battles as part of the holiday, instead emphasizing the miraculous oil that God allowed to burn for eight days. The Rabbinic conception of Hanukkah, thus, represents for us a recognition and appreciation of God’s hand in the world, as God miraculously bends the rules of nature in the case of the burning oil, and, as is the case in the Adam story, at other times maintains complex systems of nature in order to ensure life.

All of this stands in stark contrast to Havdalah. We noted above that it is no coincidence that Hazal’s recounting of the creation of fire parallels the story of Prometheus, the mythical titan who equipped humanity with the means to protect itself. Such a theme could not be more relevant than during Havdalah time, shortly after we conclude our Maariv prayers by asking God:

Psalm 90:17
May the byproduct of our handiwork prepare us, and may our handiwork prepare it.

We ask God for an assurance about the fruits of our labor in the coming week, as we look towards a new week of work ahead. In both liturgy and lived experience, Havdalah can be characterized as a period of anxiety and transition, as we leave the restful calm of Shabbat and prepare for another work week, where we will have to fend for ourselves. This worry about the week ahead is perhaps mythically expressed in Adam’s concern about his very first night on Earth. While we can’t relate to being the very first humans, we can all relate to the “Sunday Scaries,” as the weekend comes to a close and the harsh reality of social-Darwinian survival sets in. It is specifically during that time of fear and doubt that we light the Havdalah candle, and recall Adam’s model of independence and self-sufficiency.

Thus, our midrashim group together Hanukkah candles and Havdalah to flesh out a fluid and complex spectrum of possible perspectives in response to the age-old struggle of how humanity can survive on its own outside of Eden. On the one hand, Hanukkah represents to us the idea of dependence on the divine and trust in God’s plan. On the opposite end of the

6 See Shabbat 21b.

7 Much has been written about the rabbinic project of minimizing the military victory of Hanukkah. For a summary of some of the literature on this topic, see the literature cited in Vered Noam, “The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil: The Metamorpho-sis of a Legend,” HUCA 73 (2002), p. 194 n. 21.
spectrum, Havdalah represents rugged individualism and human self-sufficiency—also a value in God’s eyes. Indeed, these two opposing meanings are in fact expressed in perhaps the largest halakhic difference between these two mitzvot. While the candles we light for Hanukkah are assur be-hana’ah, prohibited from providing us any personal benefit beyond the ritual observance, the candle we light for Havdalah has only fulfilled its job if one has put their hands up close to it and personally benefited from its heat and light. Thus, even the practical halakhot of Hanukkah and Havdalah, which initially obtuse or cryptic, represent the philosophical distinction presented in our aggadot, as Hanukkah represents the distant and unobtainable elements of God and his divine plan, while Havdalah stands as a weekly reminder for man’s need to be able to be self sufficient, as the end of the weekend connotes one’s need to take care of one’s self and one’s family in the coming week.

MIDRASH AS THE KEY TO OUR PRACTICE

Ascribing our midrashic-meaning to these mitzvot also serves to abate some of the difficulties in practice noted in the introduction. How can we, inconsistently, light Hanukkah candles first in shul but recite Havdalah first at home? Given the meaning of these two mitzvot relative to one another, we can appreciate the nuance of this distinction. Understanding these two mitzvot as models on two opposing ends of a value-spectrum, the question of whether we should light Hanukkah candles or the Havdalah candle first takes on a new meaning. By performing one mitzvah before the other, we are prioritizing it and emphasizing its particular worldview—weighing the scale in favor of one end of the “Action-Inaction” spectrum.

Thus, the competition and contrast of Hanukkah candles and the Havdalah flame presents the opportunity to make an important value statement about our priorities, as we must carefully balance the question of human initiative in the face of the divine. In a shul setting, of course faith and helpless devotion should be a priority, as much like Adam prayed and fasted during his very first proto-Hanukkah, we congregate in the walls of our synagogues to pray and fast to God daily. The walls of our prayer spaces present us with a space dedicated to devotion and dependence, as we emphasize God’s outsized role in our lives throughout our prayers and liturgy. In such a setting, surely the prohibited light of the spiritual Hanukkah candles is prioritized. But at home, when we are in our own domains, and responsible for our own well being, we have to prioritize the light of Havdalah before acknowledging the message of Hanukkah. Only once we have fortified ourselves and our households for the coming week of work and human self-sufficiency, are we able to then reflect upon the background reassurance of the divine plan, as represented by Hanukkah candles.

Thereby, we can appreciate how understanding the Adam aggadot together, in their proper contexts, not only explains the content of the stories themselves—providing us with important theological and philosophical reflection on humanity’s role relative to God—but imbues our practice itself with an added depth of meaning. The strangely contradictory American custom of Motzei Shabbat Hanukkah can only truly be appreciated when the flames of mitzvot are disentangled from each other, and the halakhic texts take a seat to the aggadah’s illumination. ☞