



“The Work of My Hands Are Drowning!”:

Nationalism and Humanism on Seder Night

Dr. Tsivia Frank Wygoda – frankwygoda@hadar.org

Pesah 5784

Seder night, a celebration dedicated to the Israelites' escape from Egyptian slavery, brims with symbolic actions that bring the memory of the Exodus to life in every home. Among these rich traditions, one seemingly minor act stands out: pouring ten drops of wine from the second cup as the Ten Plagues are recounted. This custom might blend into the night's sequence of unusual events, sparking curiosity and conversation. However, unlike the other symbols that collectively build the historical, theological, and philosophical meaning of freedom and liberation, this act breaks from the main narrative. It steps outside the story of the Israelites' divine rescue and offers a different perspective, one that carries its own theological, ethical, and philosophical implications.

The custom of pouring wine from the second cup is ancient, and it has been given various meanings.¹ In our modern consciousness, it connects to another aspect of the festival,

¹ See R. David Golinkin, “Why Do We Spill 16 Drops of Wine While Reciting the Ten Plagues During the Seder?” *Responsa in a Moment: Vol. 10, No. 6*, (2016), and Zvi Ron, “The History of an Interpretation of Sixteen Drops of Wine at the Seder: Our Own Joy is Lessened and Incomplete” *Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought, Volume 19* (2015), pp. 237-255. Both articles attribute the interpretation of the custom as expressing a feeling of diminished joy, which is connected to the recitation of a short Hallel on some days of the holiday, to R. Edward Baneth (1855-1930). In total, including the three words “blood, fire, and pillars of smoke” and R. Yehudah's three-word acronym of the plagues (בַּחֲשֵׁשׁ בְּאֵשׁ בְּבָרָח), there are 16 words for which we spill wine.



namely, the abbreviated Hallel recitation on some of the festival days, as appears in the medieval *midrash* collection, Yalkut Shimoni:

ילקוט שמעוני רמז תתנד

בשביל שמתו בו המצריים. וכן אתה מוצא כל שבעת ימי החג אנו קורין בהן את ההלל אבל בפסח אין אנו קורין את ההלל אלא ביום טוב הראשון ולילו. למה משום 'בְּנֶפֶל אוֹיְבֶךָ אֶל-תִּשְׁמַח וּבְקִשְׁלוֹ אֶל-יִגַּל לְבָבְךָ' (משלי כד:יז).

Yalkut Shimoni #854

Because the Egyptians drowned in it. Similarly, you find that during all seven days of Sukkot, we recite the full Hallel, but on Pesah, we only recite the full Hallel on the first day and its night. Why? Because of “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, let not your heart exult” (Proverbs 24:17).

Despite the personal and national liberation, the abbreviated Hallel and the pouring of wine create a somber pause. These customs act as a form of self-restraint, acknowledging the suffering inflicted upon the Egyptians even in the midst of joyous celebration. These two practices may be seen as a deterrent against “rejoicing at the downfall,” countering the innate human reaction to celebrate the fate of both the slave who found freedom and the master who faced punishment. These traditions aim to elevate us beyond such an instinctive response, urging us not to simply rejoice at the downfall of the wicked. If this were the sole message of these customs, it would suffice. However, it appears to me that they hold additional significance.

Another source of inspiration for the abbreviated recitation of Hallel is found in a *midrash* appearing in the Talmud:



תלמוד בבלי מגילה י:

אמר רבי יוחנן, מאי דכתיב: 'ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה' (שמות יד:כ) — בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעשה ידי טובעין בים, ואתם אומרים שירה? אמר רבי אלעזר: הוא אינו שש, אבל אחרים משיש. ודיקא נמי, דכתיב: 'כן ישיש' (דברים כח:סג), ולא כתיב "ישוש". שמע מינה.

Talmud Bavli Megillah 10b

Said R. Yohanan: What is the meaning of that which is written: "But they did not draw close to one another all night" (Exodus 14:20)? The ministering angels sought to recite a song, and the Holy Blessed One, said, "The work of My hands is drowning in the Sea, and you would recite a song!?"

Said R. Elazar: God Himself does not rejoice, but God causes others to rejoice.

Also, it can be learned from a careful reading: "God will cause to rejoice" (*yasis*); it is not written "God rejoices: (*yasus*). Learn from this.

R. Yohanan's homily asserts that God prohibited the ministering angels from singing their normal praises in response to the destruction of the Egyptians. R. Elazar reinforces R. Yohanan's argument by delving into the grammatical nuances within another verse that illustrates the "joy" of God in punishing the Israelites if they disobey God's commandments: "And as God once delighted in making you prosperous and many, so will God now delight in causing you to perish and in wiping you out; you shall be torn from the land that you are about to enter and possess" (Deuteronomy 28:63). R. Elazar interprets the active form of the verb "to delight" (*yasis*) as meaning that God does not rejoice but rather causes others to derive satisfaction, both in Deuteronomy (with the Israelites' suffering as a result of their wrongdoing) and in Exodus (with the drowning of the Egyptians, which also constitutes the redemption of the Israelites). This implies that God expresses sorrow over the suffering of God's creatures, even when that suffering arises from God's own acts of justice.

To understand the emotional, historical, and theological significance of the *midrash* for us celebrating the Seder, let us focus on R. Yoanan's interpretive narrative. What is the meaning of God's rebuke to the ministering angels? At first glance, the situation seems very clear: the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, enslaved them harshly, and pursued them to return them to slavery. Did not God redeem the Israelites and split the Sea for them?

The words of God, "The work of My hands is drowning in the Sea," can be interpreted on several levels: Indeed, the Egyptians drowning in the sea are wicked, and their downfall is an act of justice. However, God reminds the ministering angels that these are creatures God created. The sorrow of God can be understood as the sorrow of an artist for his creation, where the former feels responsibility towards the latter because of the connection between them ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"), or like the sorrow of a parent for their child—the love and emotional involvement of one in the fate of the other. All these do not allow God to have peace. In these words, God reminds the ministering angels of a world where "Israelites" were not created, but rather **humans**. He reminds them that there exists between the Creator and all God's creatures a relationship of parent to child, of Creator to creation, and that this pattern predates Jewish history—that is to say: it predates God's choice of Abraham and God's promise to his offspring.

God also reminds the angels that the value of a person and their life is not necessarily commensurate with their moral value. Indeed, on an ethical level, the fate of the Egyptians is justified—but in God's view, human reality is more complex. This is not a new debate between God and the ministering angels, but rather began with their protest against the very decision of God to create human beings, flawed creatures destined to fail (Bavli Sanhedrin 38b).

In other words, three important insights arise from this *midrash*: first and foremost, God's relationship is one of responsibility, protection, and love towards all people. Second, this



relationship exists regardless of the moral quality of human beings, and even without any moral justification for their suffering. Third, just as it exists beyond the concept of justice, this relationship also exists beyond history.

If so, it might have been thought that there is a flaw in the Israelites' singing, and that God's rebuke to the ministering angels indirectly applies to the Israelites as well. However, the *midrash* takes place in a gap between three narratives and their relationship: the narrative of God and the ministering angels (who do not sing), the narrative of the Israelites (who do sing), and the narrative of our Sages who contemplate the complex relationship between these two narratives. The debate between God and the ministering angels does not occur in a vacuum. Our Sages do not cancel or extend criticism to the experience and response of the Israelites; quite the opposite. What is true in the divine realm is not necessarily valid in the human realm. For the Israelites, who have just been redeemed by open miracles, the hymn of thanksgiving is an essential expression of the event that defines them as a nation. However, the immediate experience of the Israelites—of humans in history—does not exhaust all aspects of that event. The national redemption is indeed the main and ultimate significance of the historical event, but there are also other aspects to that event that do not belong to the Israelites' national narrative. There is a dimension (the divine realm) where the story of the redemption of the Israelites is also a story of the suffering of the Egyptians. While human understanding tends to view events in isolation, God sees the entirety of human existence unfolding as a complex whole, holding multiple perspectives and narratives simultaneously.

The interpreters themselves shape the meaning of the *midrash*. R. Yohanan and R. Elazar, living in an era of persecution and suffering after the Temple's destruction, might have been expected to focus on themes of revenge or justice. However, they surprisingly emphasize God's sorrow for all creations. This seemingly counterintuitive choice offers a profoundly divine view of historical events. By invoking God's universalistic grief, their interpretation



expands upon the Jewish experience of loss and crisis. It suggests that human beings, too, are capable of a broader perspective on history, one that acknowledges even the suffering of an enemy by virtue of God's compassion for all beings.

This perspective, however, is complex and demanding. It does not rely on a simple narrative of historical triumph or future redemption. Instead of clinging to the historical narrative based on the downfall of the wicked and the redemption of the Israelites, and instead of replacing the present suffering with messianic hope for future redemption, it rests on a cosmic view where historical events have multiple interpretations. It compels us to understand God's goodness and actions beyond the immediate context of our own undeniable suffering, and that is no small matter.

Compassion is a complex emotion. It can be a powerful urge to help others, even enemies, but it can also blur ethical lines and challenge our identities. The Seder celebrates God's intervention in history to fulfill a promise. Yet, the custom of pouring wine out during the Seder shows that we are capable of empathizing with the suffering of others, even those who have tormented us and deserve punishment. This custom, along with the abbreviated Hallel recited later in the holiday, invites us to contemplate how we respond to suffering, even when justified. It asks us to hold a dual perspective: a nationalistic one and a universalistic human one, reflecting God's view, walking the fine line of being sensitive to suffering without losing our national identity. Even during *Pesach*, a celebration of national liberation, the *midrash* and these customs remind us of the broader human dimension and its connection to the Divine.

The words of our Sages, written in the historical context of destruction, can resonate with us today. We ourselves are in a position, like the ancient Israelites and like the Sages after them, of suffering unbearable losses at the hands of mortal enemies. We are still in mourning, and we are still under threat. And yet it feels like a compounded loss to consider abandoning the



semblance of divine perspective taught to us by our Sages and manifested at our Seder tables by our ancestors for generations: our ability to empathize with others, even those who caused us tremendous harm. R. Yohanan and R. Elazar teach us that this broader perspective, far from being naive, can be a source of hope in dark times—hope that we will not completely lose ourselves in the darkness imposed upon us, and hope that we can still access the divine perspective even while encountering the worst of humanity.

